Mary Regan

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LYING WITH HIS PALLID FACE TOWARD THE SKY, HE LOOKED HANDSOME AND BOYISH AND IRRESISTIBLY LIKABLE (*page* 373)

Mary Regan

By LEROY SCOTT

AUTHOR OF
"Partners of the Night," Etc.

With Frontispiece

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MARY REGAN

CHAPTER I

THE WORLD SITS DOWN TOGETHER

It was opening night of the new bill at the Grand Alcazar; and Clifford, as he waited alone at a little table for his host, almost unconsciously searched through the great restaurant of black-and-gold for Mary Regan — just as, almost unconsciously, he had been seeking her wherever he had been during the six months of agreed-upon silence since they had parted. He did not expect to see her here, hence felt no disappointment when his roving eyes did not come upon her. She had said she would write when she had thought it all out, and when she was ready to see him. Six months was a long time, but he believed in her word — and still waited, not once having sought to penetrate that utter privacy which she had asserted to be for her, at that time, life's prime essential. But though keeping his word, he had often been impatient, and had often wondered.

Meditatively Clifford glanced over this great crowd of well-dressed diners. For him they were a vivid concentration, a cross-section, of life: of life as he, in his philosophy, and in the pursuit of his

profession, had come to see it. Here were millionaires, many of them having made their easeful fortunes by dubious operations which shrewd counsel had steered just within the law; here were young men of moderate means, spending recklessly; here were society women of the younger and smarter set, with their escorts, sowing the seeds, though they dreamed it not, of possible scandal and possible blackmail; here were members of that breed of humans who are known as "sporting men"; here were the most finished types of professional crooks, many accompanied by the finished women of their own kind, but here and there with them a girl who had no idea of the manner of man with whom she ate and drank, and no idea of the end of this her pleasant adventure; and here were respectable mothers and their daughters, who were innocent of what sat at the next table; and here were out-of-town visitors who were visibly excited and exalted by the thought that they were seeing life — New York! — the real New York!

Clifford smiled sadly, rather grimly, to himself. These conglomerate guests were proof of what he had long held: that there was no distinct underworld, no distinct upperworld; that in ideas and personalities the two were always merging. This scene summarized what experience had made the basic idea of Clifford's working philosophy: the great interrelation, the great interdependence, the great *oneness* of all humanity.

Looking over this mixture of all sorts, in which acquaintance was so easy to make, Clifford thought of the strange dramas that had their beginnings in the Grand Alcazar and establishments of its kind. Thus much had the dancing craze, though now receded from its earliest frenzy, and the practice of dining and eating midnight suppers in the showy restaurants, achieved: it had brought all sorts of persons, so long as they were well dressed, under the same roof and had set them down at the same or adjoining tables. Hardly since time began had that important requisite of great drama been so nearly perfect as in these restaurants — for people of different ideas and interests and moral standards to meet naturally upon a common ground. . . .

A little man, swart of face, his mustache tightly waxed, and in the smartest evening dress that convention permits the male, paused and spoke to Clifford — a gentleman whom most of the patrons of the place knew, if they knew him at all, as Monsieur Le Bain. Though the master of this ornate pleasure palace, he spoke obsequiously.

Clifford liked to see the great little man squirm. "Police trouble you much here?" he asked.

"No, Bob, — I never see a policeman here, except when a captain or an inspector comes in to eat," the great restaurateur said nervously.

"Not like the old days downtown — with their raids — eh, Joe?"

"Nothing of that sort — ever!" And with a quick

look around that showed he feared some one might have overheard these sentences and guessed what lay behind them, he said something about being needed on his ballroom floor and hurried away.

Clifford watched the famous restaurateur, again smiling grimly. If these people here — the respectable ones at least — knew the record of Joe Gordon (which again was not the name given him at birth), knew from what places and occupations he had made his way to his eminence of foremost host and impresario of prandial entertainment — what a panic there would be! (Or would there be a panic?) Life was certainly strange! — with its emergencies, its juxtapositions, its crossing of threads —strange at least to him who was always seeing behind the scenes. Yes, life was certainly strange! . . .

Clifford's meditations were interrupted by a hearty, "Hello, Bob," and by a large hand gripping one of his.

"Hello, Uncle George. I'd begun to think —"

"Hold on, son," and Clifford's host halted the talk by raising one hand like a traffic policeman and with the other reaching for the dinner card. While the long order was being dictated, Clifford gazed impatiently across at his companion, wondering what this appointment was about. His host was a large man who once might have been bulbous, but who now had deflated little balloons of skin hanging beneath eyes and chin and jaws. His few short gray hairs were divided into two precisely equal por-

tions; his eyebrows were entirely gone, and of eyelashes he had almost none; his eyes were smallish, gray, cunning, genial. He made Clifford fancy, with those eyes of his so good-naturedly cynical, and with his large, outstanding ears, that here might be a satyr who had forsaken gay forests for city and had at length grown into grandfatherly days.

"Well, now, Uncle George — what's all this about?" Clifford demanded when the order was in.

"Not so fast, son, — not so fast," slowly remonstrated Uncle George, who, as far as Broadway's knowledge went, was no one's Uncle George, but who was known by no other name. "Let's wait until we've packed away some of the freight that waiter's going to bring us." He blinked his lashless lids, and drawled on. "It's been a long time since I've seen you — six months. I just wanted to give you the once over, and ask you how was trade."

"Trade's good — considering."

The old head nodded. "Yes, considering that you're a detective who's on the square. There's not much chance for that sort, son, — not in this here widely advertised Christian civilization of ours. At least, not much chance to make a large private collection of coin."

"I'm not in this primarily to make money. I thought you understood that."

"You sure are a queer guy, son," pronounced the old man. "I've heard you spiel off your ideas — you're not primarily a thief-taker — you're in this

to help people out of the trouble. A hell of an idea for a detective!"

"You know as well as I do, Uncle George, that most of the people that get into trouble, or seem to be bad — well, they personally are not so much to blame. They've been born and raised in bad conditions — they've never had a chance — have never really been able to tell what was right or wrong, and have never had a chance to choose the right —"

"Come up for air, son, — come up for air," cut in the old man. "Son, that's nice music, but it's all bunk. You're an awful example of what a college education can do to a man. Now you just listen to your Uncle George. You know me — everybody knows me. I've been in about every crooked game known to the human race and the higher animals, including managing shows — and I've never been pinched because I was too clever for the coppers, and the coppers know it, too. I tell you I know life up and down and across the middle — and I tell you that we've all got a streak of crookedness — every damned one of us!"

"If that's so," smiled Clifford, "then why are you always helping crooks?"

"That's just my human cussedness. I've retired from business — I'm one of these gentlemen farmers that have located on Broadway; but I don't like to see any earnest young crook get a raw deal from the coppers, who are the rawest crooks of all." The old man waved his left hand as though brushing such

conversation aside. "But let's get down to brass tacks — which means you and me. You and Bradley as great friends as ever?"

Despite himself Clifford flushed with chagrin. "Don't try to be funny!"

"And, son, don't be too sore. Bradley was one hell of a guy. He was the cleverest chief of detectives the Police Department ever had."

"And the crookedest!"

"Sure, son, — did n't I tell you us humans were all crooks!" the old man said appeasingly. "But, sure, there never was a crookeder chief of detectives than Bradley. You certainly showed nerve when you started out to get him — and you certainly showed your class when you finally trapped him, publicly, with the goods on. Only —"

"That's it — *only!*" Clifford exclaimed sourly. "It's quite some little word, that *only*."

"Sure — *only*. Son," — and the old man spoke gravely, — "I'm twice as old as you are, but you should know as well as I know that *you really can't get* a copper. I mean a clever copper. Count the big coppers that have really been sent away — the smart boys, I mean — and you'll see you have several fingers left to check up your laundry on. That was grand business you pulled on Bradley, and it showed all New York he was a crook. It was worth doing — God, yes! But I said to myself, as soon as I heard of the swell arrest you had made of him, that a classy guy like Bradley would have himself covered

and would beat the case when it came to trial. And he sure did beat it!"

"On a technicality!" Clifford was still bitter at the manner in which his old enemy and old superior officer had slipped from what had seemed the sure clutches of the law.

"A technicality, sure. But it got him off, and what more does a crook ever ask for?"

"But he got reinstated in the Police Department!"

"But did n't he retire right afterwards, claiming broken health? And don't you and I know his real reason was that his old game was done for and that the public was wise to him? The big trouble with you, son," the old man declared severely, "is that you want a one hundred per cent victory. The best you can hope for with a guy like Bradley is to split the thing fifty-fifty."

"You seem to admire Bradley a lot!" half growled Clifford.

"I do. I hand it to the guy with brains wherever I meet him."

"I don't see how you can be friends with me, then!"

"You're clever, too, son. You're the only one I've ever figured might beat Bradley in a finish fight. And then you're a queer party, Bob, — you're square," he drawled. "I've traveled up and down this world of he-and-she grafters, shoplifters, safeblowers, and sure-thing business men, and after it all you know it's right pleasant to sit down in the shade of a square guy. And besides, son," he added, "I said I ad-

mired Bradley because he was clever; I did n't say I liked him as a friend. Now, you, Bob, somehow I like you."

"Thanks, Uncle George." There was a moment's silence. "But that's not what you got me here to tell me."

"Perhaps not, son. But what's the hurry? Queer, ain't it," he meditated, "how all the big cops, when they leave the Police Department, open a private detective agency? I hear Bradley's doing great business since he started out as a private detective."

"Licensed blackmailer — that's what he is!"

"Sure, son, that's what they all are. A client tells a private sleuth secrets, and retains him to get information about some other party — and is held up for a big fee. The sleuth gets the information, and then makes the second party pay by threatening to expose him — second hold-up; and then makes the first client pay again by threatening to expose the original secret — third hold-up. Oh, it's a rich game Bradley's switched into!"

"Once more, Uncle George — that's not what you got me here to tell me."

"Perhaps it's not really so much I've got to tell you. Mebbe it's occurred to you" — meditatively, slowly — "that since the big upset you gave him, Bradley is n't exactly what you might call in love with you."

"Not exactly."

"Well, I heard it from a friend who's got a friend

who's got a mother-in-law who listens to little birds — and the dope runs that Bradley is out to square matters with you."

Clifford nodded. He had expected something of the sort.

"Did this little bird relay any information as to just what Bradley was going to do?"

"None that got to me. But, son, I'd keep my eyes pointed in all directions, and be careful of the friends I made, and be careful of the cases I got drawn into. It may be a long time coming, and God only knows in what direction it'll come from. Bradley knows how to handle people so they never know they're being handled — and he's likely to hit you through almost any one. Look out, son. This is serious. There'll be big doings."

Clifford gazed steadily at the old worldling. Indeed, there must be something — and big! — or else Uncle George, whose general attitude in matters of morals, police, and criminals was one of genial *laissez-faire*, would not have brought him this warning. He knew from experience the craft and power of Bradley — his subtle patience in working out his designs, his patience in waiting apparently quiescent for the ripe moment — the swiftness and might with which he struck when the instant came to strike.

Automatically, swiftly, Clifford's mind flashed forward in search of possible weapons, of direct and devious schemes, that the fertile-brained Bradley might be contriving against him.

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN OF MARY REGAN

SUDDENLY all conjectures concerning Bradley were swept utterly from his mind. Down the gilded red-carpeted stairway that led from what the Grand Alcazar termed its "ballroom de luxe," there came — though this was not the figure Clifford first noted — a short, full-bodied, ornately dressed man, with a bald crown and a smile of engaging amiability. Beside him, and a half-head taller, — and this is what Clifford first saw, — walked a slender young woman, in an evening coat of rose velvet, her rounded throat gleaming a dusky marble from the soft shadows of the furred collar. Her face was the rose-tan of early autumn leaves, and her dark eyes gazed straight before her with a composure so complete that it seemed to announce a haughty indifference to all the world.

"Mary Regan!" ejaculated Clifford, stupefied.

Uncle George seemed not the least startled by Clifford's exclamation. He turned — and then there was surprise enough in his voice: —

"Hello — Peter Loveman with her!"

Clifford, recovered from his brief paralysis, arose and hurried between the tables. But the pair had already turned into the entrance and did not note

him. As Clifford came into the gilded and bepalmed lobby, he saw her, aided by four eager Grand Alcazar flunkeys and by Loveman, looking a grotesquely small grand opera impresario in his silk hat and fur coat, stepping into a closed car. By running Clifford could have caught her, or by calling he could have gained her attention. But at that instant he remembered the essence of their bargain, that he should make no attempt to seek her out until she sent for him. That remembrance checked him; the door closed upon the rose-velvet figure, the car slid off through Broadway's incandescent brilliance, and she was gone.

Foregetful of where he was, Clifford stood bareheaded and stockstill in the lobby. Mary Regan's sudden reappearance out of the silence, the vacancy, of six months' absence, sent his mind flashing over the past, the present, the future, touching in chaotic wonderment the high spots of his strange relationship with her. . . . Daughter of that one-time famous cynic and famous master criminal, "Gentleman Jim" Regan, dead these five years, she had passed her girlhood in the cynical philosophy of the little court surrounding her father, — had made that philosophy her own, — and, grown into young womanhood, she had joined that great crime *entrepreneur*, her Uncle Joe Russell, in many of his more subtle enterprises. It was at the beginning of this career that Clifford's life had come into contact with hers. Police Commissioner Thorne had ordered him

to "cover" the pair. From the first Clifford had conceived the idea that her criminal point of view was not an expression of her true nature, but was a habit of mind developed in her by association: and he had proceeded upon the theory that a bigger rôle, than merely to make arrests, would be to arouse the real Mary Regan to her true self. . . . The conflicts between the two! — her hostility to him! — his ultimate success, or seeming success, when he had broken through her shell of defensive cynicism — and last of all, that parting scene down in Washington Square in the dusk of the on-coming dawn! . . .

He lived through that scene for a briefest moment — he was always living over that scene. He had told her that he loved her; and she, admitting that she loved him, had said, "But that does n't mean I can marry you." "Then, what does it mean?" he had demanded. A look of decision had come into her face — how vividly he recalled every minutia of their one love-scene! — and she had said: —

"Before we can talk definitely about such things, I want to go off somewhere, alone, and think over what you have said about me. If I am not what I used to be — if I am really that different person you say I am, I want to get acquainted with myself. I seem so strange to myself, it all seems so strange. I hope you are right — but I must be sure — very sure — and so I am going away."

"But when you come back?" he had cried.

"A lot may happen before that," she had answered gravely. "A lot to you, and a lot to me."

"But when you come back?" he had insisted.

"When I come back," she had breathed quaveringly, "if you still think the same way about my being that sort of person — and if I find that it's really true —"

And then his arms had closed about her and he had kissed her. But even as she had let him, she had murmured almost fearfully: "Remember — a lot — may happen — before then . . ."

Clifford's mind leaped forward from that long-gone night to the present. And now she was back — back out of the unknown into which she had disappeared — and back without having sent him a word of any kind! What did it mean, this unannounced return? And what did it mean, her being in company with dapper little Peter Loveman? — man-about-town, and carrying behind that round, amiable smile the shrewdest legal brain of its variety in New York.

Clifford had in reality been standing in the gilded lobby for no more than a minute, though his mind had traversed so wide a space, when a gray-and-black town-car, with a long hood that suggested power ample for a racer, slowed down at the curb and a young man stepped out and hurried into the Grand Alcazar. Fifth Avenue tailors and hatters and haberdashers had equipped him with their best and costliest.

"Sink my ship if it's not old Bob Clifford!" he cried, giving Clifford a slender, soft hand. "How's the old boy?"

"Same as always. And how's Jackie Morton? You've been missing for months."

"I've a wonderful tale to unfold — but no time to unfold it now."

There was that about him which begot an instant liking, though his face was not as strong as it might have been.

"Say — you won't believe it — but listen. I've been on the wagon for seventeen weeks!"

"No!"

"Give you my word! Not a drop in seventeen ages! Had to, you know. My old man — say, he's one old battleship! — steamed into New York and shut off supplies, and said unless I cut it all out and took a brace, there'd be no more shipments of munitions. Get the situation, don't you? — case of a sixteen-inch gun shoved into my face and bein' told it would go off if I did n't reform. So look and behold and observe what's happened — I'm reformed! Been off where milk 's all they shove 'cross the bar — isolated, and all that kind of thing — and been behavin' in a way to make the Ten Commandments jealous. Honest to God, Clifford —"

Abruptly he checked this effervescence. "Say, seen Peter Loveman about here?"

"He's just gone."

"Alone?"

"I believe there was a young lady with him," Clifford replied discreetly — wondering a little what young Morton's business, if any, could be with the pair that had left.

Morton hesitated; then again was effervescent. "Was to have met him here — but there's no tellin' where he is. Come on — let's have a drink."

"But you are on the wagon."

"I am. But I want to give you the grand sight of watchin' me fall off."

"You sit tight right where you are," advised Clifford.

"Now, come on, don't block traffic with a funeral," pleaded the young fellow, slipping an arm through Clifford's. "Just one drink!" Clifford shook his head; and Morton tried to draw him into the restaurant. "Just one little drink, Clifford, — one little drink after a Sahara of milk!"

"Mr. Morton!" a deep, brusque voice called from behind them.

They turned. A man, square of shoulders and deep of chest and with square, forceful face, was advancing toward them.

"Hello, Clifford," he said.

"Hello, Bradley," Clifford returned, trying to speak calmly — and for the briefest space these old enemies, who had so often been at grips, stared at each other, with hard, masked gazes.

Bradley turned to Clifford's companion. "So you tried to give me the slip, Mr. Morton. I heard

what you suggested to Clifford. But I guess you are keeping off the booze to-night."

"Just look this large person over, Clifford," mourned the young fellow; "and honest, ain't it hell, my father wishing a party like Bradley on me for a nurse!"

"You need one all right!" Bradley said grimly.

"But even babies get let alone for an hour now and then," protested the other.

"You forget that the size of my check from your father depends upon my keeping you and booze apart."

Morton sighed. "You 're a sordid person, Bradley."

"I might mention incidentally," continued Bradley, "that your father has just come to town."

"The devil!" Morton's face filled with dismay. "I guess, then, it really is good-night, Clifford." He took Bradley's arm. "Come on, nursie; let's hail the captain of my perambulator."

Clifford watched the two go out, and again he had the sense that he was glimpsing into the complicated maze behind the brilliant surface of Big Pleasure. The relationship between that pair might be strange for any other period in the world's history, but it was a definite, though small, phase of this great pleasure life — a gay young spender bridled and the reins put in the hands of a private officer. Clifford felt a moment's uneasiness for young Morton: in what ways could Bradley not twist his client

and protégé into predicaments that would bring him profit?

When Clifford regained his table, Uncle George regarded him with amazement. "I thought you had gone!"

"Gone where?"

"With or after Miss Regan."

"Why?"

"I thought you were — well, I guess you get me. That being the case, I did n't think you'd pass up the chance to be with her."

Clifford hesitated, then spoke the truth: "The last time I saw Mary Regan, I promised not to speak to her until she sent for me."

"And it was your promise that stopped you?" Uncle George asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"You poor simp! I suppose you thought she'd be thinking of you, only you, with you out of her sight for six months — and that then there'd come a sweet little message like them they flash on the movie screens!"

Clifford did not reply. Uncle George had very nearly expressed his thought.

"No woman ever lived that could keep thinking of one man for six months, and him away!" Uncle George leaned closer, and spoke in a low voice. "See here, son, — while you've been keeping your promise and remaining strictly off the premises, what do you think the other people have been doing?"

"What other people?" cried Clifford, in quick alarm.

Uncle George ignored the question. "You think you've been an influence upon her. Mebbe so, son. Mebbe so. But she was twenty, and two or three more, before you ever saw her. Don't you think those twenty years might have some influence with her, too?"

"What other people?" repeated Clifford.

Again Uncle George ignored the question. He looked at Clifford keenly, and spoke slowly.

"'While ago you asked me why I wanted to meet you here. Well, son, my chief reason was because I knew Mary Regan was going to be here — and because I thought, on seeing her, you'd wade right into the situation."

"See here, George, what do you know?" Clifford cried sharply.

"Mighty little that's definite, — and telling you that would be giving people away, and that's against my principles, — and, besides, the little I know might only be misleading. But, son," — the old man's voice was grave, — "if you're at all interested in that girl, you sure ought to be busy. And that's all I can say."

Abruptly Clifford stood up. "Thanks, Uncle George, — good-bye —" And he was gone.

CHAPTER III

PETER LOVEMAN

CLIFFORD'S first business was to make up for the opportunity he had just let slip, and find Mary Regan. At once he decided that his best source of information was her brother, "Slant-Face," once a pickpocket of amazing skill, now the manager of a little motion-picture house. He turned uptown to Slant-Face's theater.

On the way he was feverishly alive with questions. Clifford's thoughts had really not been off Mary Regan from the moment he had seen her come down the stairway; and now Uncle George's vague warning — he knew Uncle George would not have spoken even so indefinitely unless there existed a very real situation — banished all else from his mind. Why had n't Mary Regan sent him word? What was behind her return in such a manner? What decision had she come to in regard to herself during these months? What decision in regard to him?

And this danger that Uncle George had hinted at — did it rise chiefly from the plans and influence of other persons? And who might these other persons be? And what might be the danger? Or might the danger rise partly out of the complexities, the contradictions, of her own nature? — that nature which had

always so baffled and eluded him. But the doubt which lay behind this last question seemed disloyal, and he forcibly drove it from his mind. Mary Regan, he emphatically told himself, was the woman he had believed her to be! She could explain everything. Whatever might be wrong was due to the unknown other persons.

Slant-Face's theater, though the hour was only ten, was dark. He hurried to Slant-Face's apartment; but Slant-Face was not there, and his wife knew nothing of his whereabouts. Downtown again, Clifford began a tour of Slant-Face's hang-outs; and at length he found him standing alone at the end of the Knickerbocker bar, before him a glass of butter-milk — a slender, smartly dressed person, whose immobile, lean face was given a saturnine cast by the downward slant of the left corner of his mouth.

"I saw your theater was closed, Slant-Face," said Clifford. "What's the matter?"

"Bradley."

"Bradley! How could he have anything to do with closing your theater?"

"Bradley has n't forgot my little part in your stunt that got him out of the Department. He just waited — and laid his plans. While films were being run off and the house was dark, he had pockets picked in my place, or had people say their pockets were picked — pulled this three times. What with my reputation, this was enough for the Commissioner of Licenses, and he closed my joint."

"That's pretty rank. Bradley certainly does have a long memory — and a long arm!"

"This is a five-reel picture, and it's not all been run off yet," half growled Slant-Face through his thin lips. "In the last reel, some one is going to get him!" He sipped his buttermilk, then abruptly: "Clifford, because of what you've done for me, I've played it straight for a year. The straight game don't pay — not for me. So I'm through. I guess you understand what comes next."

"See here, Slant-Face, don't be —"

"I'm through!" There was the snap of absolute finality in the low, quiet voice.

Clifford knew that mere words could not change the decision made behind that lean, grim visage; so he turned to the matter that had brought him there.

"Have you seen your sister to-day?"

"Have n't seen Mary in six months."

"You mean you don't know where she's staying?" exclaimed Clifford.

"Down South in the woods somewhere, — God knows why, — doing a stretch of self-imposed solitary."

The obviously honest answer sharpened Clifford's already poignant uneasiness. "Slant-Face, I saw her an hour ago."

"In New York?"

"At the Grand Alcazar." And then he added: "She was with Peter Loveman."

Even the stoic Slant-Face started. "With Peter

Loveman! — the lawyer that beat Bradley's case for him! What the devil does that mean?"

"Just what I'm wondering myself."

"You mean you did n't ask her anything — did n't speak to her?"

"No."

Slant-Face looked his bewilderment. He had had his own private guess at what had been the situation between Clifford and his sister. But he did not ask the "why" of this to him strange behaviour on Clifford's part.

"Mary with Peter Loveman!" he repeated. "Either Mary is trying to put something across — in the old way, you understand; or else she's — well, it looks like queer doings to me!"

"That's why I looked you up. Some one should step in, and stop what's under way. I supposed you knew where she was."

"I'm going to begin to try to find out," said Slant-Face. "And you?"

"Same here. By the way, would your Uncle Joe know anything?"

"Did n't you know? He's sold out everything here and bought himself a fruit farm in California."

"Then there's just one man we're certain does know. That's Loveman, and I'm going after Loveman. Let me know if you get next to anything, Slant-Face. So-long."

Clifford and the once master pickpocket clasped hands.

"And Slant-Face," Clifford added, "about that other matter — getting money in the old way. Don't do it."

"I'm not promising," said Slant-Face quietly.

Clifford privately asked Police Commissioner Thorne to help in locating Mary Regan. Also he hunted up little Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly, one hundred and twenty pounds of grit and daring, head of the Tenderloin Squad that free-lanced through the hotels, restaurants, and resorts of Broadway, and of Jimmie he asked the same help. He himself, for two days and nights, now and then seeing Uncle George and Slant-Face, trailed Peter Loveman from office to courts and back again — and particularly about the restaurants and theaters and after-theater theaters, which comprised Loveman's especial habitat.

But not again did Clifford see Loveman with Mary Regan. The second night, however, he did see Loveman with young Morton, and with the two a middle-aged man with a masterful face. Morton's father, Clifford guessed.

And yet, though he saw nothing, all his senses assured him with growing insistence that great forces were at their hidden work — those subtle, complex forces that operate indirectly, patiently, with infinite cunning, behind the alluring and often innocent visage of brilliant Big Pleasure. And also he had a growing sense that this was not primarily a detective's puzzle; but primarily a matter of the eternal human mystery of how human beings react, and

how they may be artfully stimulated. He felt himself just a human being in the midst of a human problem whose outlines he could not yet discern.

On the third day of failure it came to Clifford that there was a chance — a bare chance — that Loveman had no design involving Mary Regan, and he decided to go openly to him. At Loveman's lavish downtown offices he was told Loveman had telephoned he would not appear that morning. Twenty minutes later Clifford, after having sent in his card by the Japanese butler-valet, was in Loveman's study. The room, the studio of an apartment designed for an artist, was furnished with a disordered luxury and culture which Clifford knew to be a genuine characteristic of the strange little notable on whom he waited. Here were rows and rows of first editions; old Dutch etchings, among them several original Rembrandts; a helter-skelter gallery of autographed photographs of favorite actresses. For a score of years, as Clifford knew, Loveman had not missed an important first night.

Whatever might be the outcome of this interview, Clifford knew that sometime, somehow, between him and Loveman there would be a conflict of wits. So he looked swiftly and curiously around the room, for concerning this room there were current many fables. This study, and not the downtown office, was said to be Loveman's real workshop. Here were created those astute plans, in which the influence of Loveman was never traceable, that brought to his

downtown office those big-fee'd domestic cases, to be fought brilliantly and sensationally in the courts or to be settled discreetly in private. He was New York's ablest representative of a type of lawyer that modern social conditions have produced: a specialist in domestic affairs — and one, when profitable dissension or threatening scandal did not exist, who knew how to create such. It was gossiped that he kept a careful record of all tangled relations among the rich, of the details of every delicate situation, and watched and bided his time until at length the affair threatened to explode into a scandal — and then he acted. In this study there was a huge "Scandal File," so gossip had it; but Clifford, looking about, saw no such fabled article of furniture.

At that moment Loveman entered, his tonsured head and rope-girdled dressing-gown giving him the appearance of a somewhat jolly and rakish monk.

"Good-morning, Clifford," he exclaimed, cordially holding out his hand. "Mightily like a Christian of you, looking an old tramp up."

"They told me at your office that you were sick."

Loveman waved Clifford into a chair, took one himself and crossed his small, exquisitely slippered feet. "That's what I told the office, but I did n't tell 'em what sort of sickness it was. My boy," — with a frank, engaging grin, which was one of the many qualities that made this strange man so popular, — "do you perceive any adequate excuse for a man of

my supposedly sensible years starting in at 11.30 P.M. on a mixed-drink Marathon?"

"I can't say," smiled Clifford, "without a knowledge of the prior —"

"Don't be legally cautious with an incautious lawyer. There was no excuse." Loveman shook his round head solemnly. "There was provocation, though. You bet there was provocation. Were you at the opening last night of 'Orange Blossoms'?"

"No."

"Congratulations. It's a dam' rotten show! And Nina Cordova — she's all there off the stage, pretty, and clever, and one wise little girl, don't you forget it! — but a dam' rotten star and the voice of a guinea-hen that's got the quinsy. And it cost sixty thousand dollars to get the curtain up last night, and I put up twenty thousand dollars of that boodle. Tell me, oh, why" — with a quaver of mock self-sympathy — "am I always going out of my own line and letting myself be played as a sucker by some manager or actress that wants extra backing? Twenty thousand honest-to-God dollars! I kissed 'em goodbye the very minute Nina first opened that dam' pretty mouth, and her first note rasped across the footlights! Ain't I the boob!"

Clifford smiled at the grotesquely disconsolate figure, but did not answer; he knew no answer was expected. But while he smiled, waiting, part of his brain was remarking that these seemingly reckless ventures of Loveman were in truth sound invest-

ments on which, by the devious methods of his art, he later realized sumptuously. That twenty thousand, which would make the vain Nina regard him as her disinterested friend and adviser, was n't money thrown away — not in view of the whispered affair between the voiceless prima donna, and —

"Why should I be blowing my roll," continued Loveman, "on these dam' musical comedies — *musical*, say there's some irony for you! — when what I'd have liked would have been to help back a show like 'Justice.' Or the Russian ballet. Nijinsky — there's some artist for you!" His last words were vividly sincere; there was nothing more sincere about the little man than his admiration for the highest endeavors in art. "And yet my coin goes into 'Orange Blossoms'! Is there an artistic Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? — there is, and I'm the party — and that's why my stomach, esophagus, palate, tongue, mouth, and all appertaining thereunto, are this A.M. composed of a faded and dusty Brussels carpet. But, my boy, you did n't come here to listen to my woes. What can I do for you?"

His humorously bewailing manner had suddenly dropped from him; he was brisk and alert, and his over-large eyes were fixed upon Clifford keenly. Clifford knew that there was little chance of deceiving this holder of the threads of destiny in a direct encounter.

"I came here, Loveman, to ask you for the address of Mary Regan."

Loveman looked puzzled. "Mary Regan — do I know her?"

Was there something behind this evasion? "You remember her if you remember getting Bradley off. She was in that case."

"Oh, yes, I remember: slender — dark — handsome. But I have n't seen her since the trial."

"I don't mean to call you anything, Loveman, — but I was told you were recently seen with her in public."

"Where?"

"At the Grand Alcazar — for dinner — three nights ago."

Loveman smiled. "You've caught me. I own up. But my fib was a gentleman's lie."

"How so?"

"She did n't want it known that she was in New York."

"Why not?"

"Search me. Perhaps just a girl's whim."

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"Have n't the slightest idea. I was with her more or less by accident. I was taking care of her merely for a couple of hours — substituting for a friend of hers."

Clifford felt sure the little man was lying; but he also felt sure he could get out of Loveman nothing Loveman preferred not to tell. All the brains of the Bar Association had not been able to do this when Loveman had been before that body on charges of unprofessional conduct.

"By the by, Clifford, what's your interest in the young lady?"

"Her family heard she was back, and engaged me to locate her."

Loveman, looking keenly at Clifford, did not betray whether or not he recognized this as prevarication. Clifford stood up.

"Well, as you were my only clue, I might as well give the matter up. Sorry to have bothered you. Good-morning."

"Oh, you'll find her — you have the reputation of doing whatever you start out to do. Don't hurry away. I've got some new first editions I want to show you. But pardon me for just a moment." He scratched a line upon a sheet of paper, rang, and handed the folded sheet to the Japanese butler, who silently withdrew. "Now!" he cried briskly, and began to talk enthusiastically over half a dozen stained and musty volumes.

Half an hour later the noiseless butler appeared, bearing a card. Loveman begged Clifford to excuse him, and withdrew — to reënter in five minutes.

"Something rather curious has just happened, Clifford. A gentleman with whom I've had some dealings just called — I had an inspiration — I made a suggestion, and — Well, let him speak for himself. Come right in!"

At this, through the door Loveman had left open, stepped the square, solid figure of Bradley.

"I believe you two are acquainted with each

other," remarked Loveman with his amiable briskness.

The two men nodded, and for a moment stood silent. Clifford tried to read Bradley's purpose, but Bradley's powerful face, with its small, brilliant eyes, was as controlled and reticent as in the days, now over a year gone, when Bradley used to give him orders at Police Headquarters.

"H'are you, Clifford." The voice was the same even, heavy bass.

"First-class, Bradley."

"Chairs, gentlemen," put in Loveman; and when they were seated: "Shall I say it, Bradley, or will you?"

"I'll say it." Without preface, or reference to the past, Bradley was in the midst of things. "I'm building up a big business, Clifford. Another year or so, and it'll be the biggest private detective agency in the country. It's already getting too big for one man to manage; besides, there are certain kinds of cases that another man can handle better than I can. I've been looking over the field for the right man. Clifford, I've decided you're this right man, and I want to ask you if you'd be willing to go into partnership."

"Don't speak yet — think it over for a minute," put in Loveman. "You two have had your little differences, but it ought to be plain to both of you that there's more in it for you two working together than fighting each other."

Clifford managed to maintain a composed exterior, but within he was bewilderment. Certainly Bradley was a most amazing man!

Clifford thought swiftly, if somewhat dazedly. Was this a trap? It might be — probably was, in view of what had previously passed between them.

But then again — it might not be a trap. Bradley's offer, on the face of it, was a good business proposition, advantageous to both parties. It was a commonplace of business and politics and police affairs, that competitors and even deadly enemies may scratch the past off the books and combine in a common effort when they vision a profit sufficiently large in such a procedure.

And profit there certainly would be in Bradley's proposition — big profit. First, would be the original profit of the large fees which clients would pay to have information secured for them. And second, — if the agency were to be run as most other private detective agencies, and on this Bradley would doubtless insist, — there would be the usual large profits secured through the pleasant and easy device of blackmailing clients by threatening to reveal to the public the scandals they had been paid privately to uncover and corroborate. Beyond a doubt, tremendous profits!

Yes, it might not be a trap. It might be just a a plain business proposition. It might be —

Another thought: It might be a bribe!

Yes, whatever else it might be, it also was cer-

tainly a bribe. But to buy him away from what? . . . From what? . . .

"It's a good proposition—yes?" prompted Loveman.

Though Clifford had taken time to think, his decision had been made the very moment he had understood Bradley's proposition.

"As you say, Bradley, there's big money in it, and it's a great chance for the right party. I want to thank you for considering me and offering me the chance. But I never expect to build up a big business, and such cases as I do take on I want to handle personally and in my own way."

Bradley's square face showed not the slightest change. "That's your privilege, to do things the way you like. Glad I spoke to you about it, though."

"That's another good inspiration I had that's gone on the rocks," humorously complained Loveman—"as bum a guesser here as when I backed Nina Cordova in 'Orange Blossoms.'" He followed Clifford to the door, a hand upon his arm. "Anyhow, I may want to be shoving some business your way."

"Thanks." Clifford nodded to Bradley, and Bradley nodded back, his face the same grim mask as ever.

CHAPTER IV

AS MARY SEES HERSELF

As Clifford went out it seemed to him, for the moment, that his efforts thus far had resulted only in bringing him into contact with affairs far removed from his main business. But the next moment experience reminded him that nothing in life was irrelevant. Might not these seemingly unrelated fragments be revealed as closely articulated parts of a great drama of life whose working-out lay in the unvisioned future?

Anyhow, he had new questions to put to himself. What was behind Loveman's suave statement that he knew nothing of Mary Regan? And what behind Bradley's offer of partnership? They meant something: and the more Clifford thought, the more was he convinced that Loveman was in whatever business might be brewing; and since Loveman was in it, it was safely and adroitly based upon the weakness, vanity, or ambition of our common human nature.

The sense, though he had little definite basis for it, that Mary was vitally concerned in this impenetrable business, that she was perhaps the chief victim of its hidden workings and of its dangers, grew in Clifford with every moment. He simply had to find her!

Hoping against hope, Clifford daily expected a note from Mary Regan — for he could not wholly discount her promise — but no note came. And though Uncle George, Slant-Face, and Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly, in their divers manners, were all looking for Mary, none during the next four days reported a trace of her. Nor did Commissioner Thorne, with his larger resources, turn up a single clue. She seemed to have vanished utterly.

All these days Clifford himself kept doggedly to the tedious routine of centering his personal endeavors upon Peter Loveman — following that dapper gentleman from home to office, to court-rooms, to restaurants on Broadway or the Avenue for his substitute for afternoon tea, to his home again to dress, then to the long evening's schedule of pleasures — taking rest only during the periods when Loveman was held in court, or during the five hours between three and 8 A.M. that Loveman allowed himself for sleep.

On the seventh afternoon, while Loveman was tied up in court, and while Clifford was spending an hour at home, a note was delivered him by messenger. It read: —

> See me at headquarters at your earliest convenience.
> THORNE.

Clifford considered. Then he sent back the message, "Will try to come at five." It was now three o'clock; Loveman would be out of court at half-

past three or four. He had decided that the best procedure was to follow Loveman from court to club or restaurant, and then if the lawyer seemed settled, as usually was the case, he could safely slip down to Police Headquarters.

At four o'clock Clifford saw Loveman leave the Criminal Courts Building and step into the closed car he had seen Loveman and Mary Regan enter seven nights earlier in front of the Grand Alcazar. Clifford, at a discreet distance, followed in a taxi. The big car, after twisting about through the region of clubs and restaurants, deposited Loveman before a great hotel on Fifth Avenue, The Grantham. Clifford, following him in, saw Loveman address the perfect young blonde who sat at a switchboard within a grilled enclosure, wait while the blonde announced his name through the telephone, then saw him make for the elevators.

Clifford waited several minutes, then himself approached the deity of the switchboard. "I want to get in touch with Mr. Loveman at once, and I believe he's calling here."

"Yes, on Mrs. Gardner — twelfth floor, Apartment M. Shall I 'phone up you're here?"

"I guess I'll not interrupt him. I'll catch him when he comes down." The blonde, Clifford had at once divined, was the sort not averse to talk. "I wonder if this is the Mrs. Gardner I know," he said easily. "What's she like?"

"Never really seen her," returned the blonde.

"Has all her meals in her suite. Goes out only at night — about nine, when everything's dead here — just for an hour's motor ride. She's always in black, and veiled. Guess she's a widow."

A little more chat and Clifford drifted into the hotel bar, from which he could watch the elevators. He sipped his Vichy with a casual, lounging air that required his best acting. Could that Mrs. Gardner be Mary Regan? And if she was Mary Regan, was she also truly Mrs. Gardner?

Half an hour passed; then Loveman came out of one of the elevators. Clifford had a moment's fear that the blonde would tell him that a caller had made inquiry for him; but the blonde was answering the questions of a guest and did not see Loveman go out. Clifford allowed a few more minutes to pass, then he approached the blonde's cage with a brisk air.

"There's something Mr. Loveman forgot to say to Mrs. Gardner, and he asked me to come back and tell her. Just say it's Mr. Loveman calling again."

The girl spoke through the telephone as directed; then, "You're to go right up."

Tingling with suspense, Clifford shot up to the twelfth floor and rang the bell of Apartment M. The door was promptly opened, and without waiting for the maid to cry a warning because of this suddenly altered Mr. Loveman, Clifford walked quickly past her through a little hallway into a sitting-room. At a window, looking down into the Avenue stood a

slender figure in a gown of gold-brown chiffon velvet, softly touched with fur. She was Mary Regan.

"Sit down, Mr. Loveman," she said, not turning. And then after a pause she added a bit impatiently, but in that distant, composed tone she had so often used toward him in other days: "Well, what else is there? Have n't I already promised to follow your instructions in every detail?"

Clifford did not reply, and his silence caused her to turn. At sight of him the tint of autumn rose left her dark face.

"Mr. Clifford!" she breathed.

"Good-afternoon—" He hesitated; the last time he had spoken to her, six months before, he had called her Mary. "Good-afternoon, Miss Regan."

And then the fear that was in him caused him quickly to add, "Or should I say Mrs. Gardner?"

"I am still Mary Regan." She moved nearer. "You here! The name you sent up was Mr. Loveman."

"I used Mr. Loveman's name because I thought if I sent my own you would refuse to see me."

"Why?"

He had searched her out primarily to learn the danger she was in and to save her from it, but here he was in the first moment speaking of himself. "I reasoned that you did not want to see me from the fact that you have been in town a week and have sent me no word. And I thought, after your promise —"

He could not finish. She motioned him to be seated, herself took a chair, and there was a moment's pause. Pale, a strained composure in her face, she was wondrously striking in the gold-brown velvet with its margin of fur; she seemed to have matured, yet to have grown no older; and never before had she seemed more poignantly desirable to him. The old questions that had haunted him for six months, surged up and he was almost choked with the immanence of the answer to them. Had there come the change that they had talked about? Had she reached the decision that he had so long been waiting for?

At length she spoke, and the contralto warmth and color of her voice were subdued to a neutral monotone. "I could have sent you word," she said. "But I have no excuse to offer, and prefer not to explain."

"You know what I've been hoping for — and waiting for," he said with difficulty. "You have not forgotten that last night in Washington Square?"

"No. And you have not forgotten the point I then insisted upon — that I wanted to go off, alone, to examine myself and try to learn whether I was really the sort of woman you declared me to be."

"I remember. And now that you have been away, and come back?"

Her voice was steady. "I have learned I am not that kind of woman."

"No?"

"I have learned that I do not look upon life — that is life for myself — in the way you thought I would."

"Just what do you mean?"

"I know now that I am by nature more worldly than you believed me."

He grew suddenly sick at her even words. "I was hoping that you would have decided that you cared for me."

"I am and always shall be grateful to you for the things you did for me, and I shall always appreciate your high opinion of the qualities you believed to exist in me. You were kind and generous — and I shall never forget."

"But you have no other feeling — toward me?"

She shook her head.

"Then this is final — as far as my hopes are concerned," he whispered dryly. He was dazed; too dazed to note that she had grown even more pale than a few moments before and that her hands were gripping folds of the velvet gown.

Presently he tried to pull himself together. He remembered the main purpose of his presence here.

"But at least you will let me help you?"

"Certainly — if I need you."

He leaned closer. "You never needed me more than now!"

"For what reason?"

"You are in danger — great danger!"

She started, and gazed at him with a sharp pene-

tration which even at that moment struck him as peculiar. "In what danger?"

Her question took him back. In his intensity he had forgotten that he knew so little that was definite.

"I thought you would know," he confessed. And then, with a ring of certainty, "If you do not know yourself to be in danger, then why are you in hiding?"

She ignored his last sentence. "I am in no danger of which I am conscious."

He seized upon the one point he was certain of. "But you have been seeing Peter Loveman. I hope you are not letting him get control of your affairs."

"Mr. Loveman has merely been giving me some friendly advice. He is a very able lawyer."

"There is no abler lawyer in New York than Peter Loveman. But Peter Loveman cannot be trusted."

"I am not trusting him — very far." She spoke with that supreme self-confidence that had always characterized her. "And I believe I can take care of myself." This last she added coldly, yet not unkindly.

Clifford felt himself baffled. And then, suddenly, he remembered another possible source of danger to her — or at least of danger to that Mary Regan he had believed her to be. Could she, as the worldly-wise old Uncle George had suggested, have felt the pull of old associations, old points of view, and have reverted —

But even as he was thinking of this, she with her remarkable keenness had read his mind. "Don't

worry about that. I have no intention of going back to the sort of things I once tried to do, and you stopped me from doing."

"I'm glad of that," he said simply. And then he added, "But still I feel you are in some great vague danger."

"What?" she queried as before. "I am here of my own choice. I go and come as I please. Whatever I may now be doing I do of my own free will."

"Then you have a plan?"

She was silent a long moment, all the while gazing at him steadily. Then she replied, "I have."

"May I ask what it is?"

"You have earned the right. As Robert Clifford, the man, you might not approve of it. As Robert Clifford, detective, you can find nothing wrong. Beyond this I can tell you nothing — now."

He felt shut out — placed at a far distance — and felt the dizzy sickness once more come on him. He had met her again, after long waiting, after long search — and this was the poor ending of it all!

He saw her glance furtively at a gilded clock. Awkwardly he arose.

"I've kept you too long," he mumbled.

She made no polite denial, but also stood up. He started out — and found he could not go.

He turned. "Please tell me two other things. First, why are you in hiding?"

"That I must be excused from answering."

"Is it part of your plan?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"And your calling yourself Mrs. Gardner — is that, too, a part of your plan?"

"Yes — to the extent that I am temporarily using it to hide behind. Now you must go — please!"

"Good-bye — I won't bother you any further."

Sick, bewildered, and with as great a fear as when he entered, Clifford started out. But at that moment there was a ring at the doorbell.

"Why did n't you go before!" cried Mary; and then, seizing his arm, "Wait, you must n't go now!"

"Why?"

"It would be misunderstood."

"Then you know who that is?"

"Yes."

"Is it Peter Loveman?"

"No." Her dark eyes gazed at him very straight; she spoke rapidly. "You are an old acquaintance — you met me in Paris before the war broke out — that's all you really know about me. Except that my name is Mary Regan."

"I'll play the part," said Clifford.

"Sit there by the window."

Clifford obeyed, more dazed than ever, and wonderingly watched Mary. She stood in the middle of the room, tensely composed. The maid had answered the bell, and Clifford now heard a man's voice in the hall — a familiar voice. The next moment the visitor was through the doorway, and Clifford beheld that likable young man-about-town, Jack Morton.

But Jack Morton saw only Mary, and his face flushed with delight. "Mary!" he cried and crossed to her with open arms. Without hesitation she stepped forward and her lips met his.

Clifford experienced such a swift onrush of dizziness and sickness that he barely kept his seat.

After a moment Mary drew away from Morton. "Jack, I want to introduce an old acquaintance to you — Mr. Clifford."

"Bob Clifford — you here!" cried Morton. "You know Miss Regan?"

Clifford remembered his lines. "I met Miss Regan in Paris before the outbreak of the war."

Mary held her pale face steadily upon Clifford. "I suppose, Jack, Mr. Clifford might as well know the truth."

"After what he's seen I guess he knows it." Young Morton, a glowing smile on his pleasant face, held out his hand. "Congratulate me, Bob!"

Clifford took the hand. "You—you are married?"

"We are going to be — as soon as it's safe."

"Safe?"

"You see my —"

"Mr. Clifford does not need to know that," Mary quickly interrupted.

"Why —" Clifford stared; gulped. "I did not even know you were acquainted."

"We were not, till three months ago." Morton grinned happily. He slipped his arm about Mary and Mary allowed it to remain. "Remember my

telling you the other night about my being away, far from the madding crowd? — in a place where they don't raise a thing but isolation? Well, that's where I met Mary — at Pine Mountain Lodge. Was n't that some coincidence, Bob?"

Clifford agreed that it was. He looked searchingly at Mary; but her pale, proud face met his eyes with a steadfast gaze that was blank of any offer to apologize or explain.

"Here's wishing you luck, Morton," Clifford said with a control that surprised himself. He gave Mary Regan a look that was quite as composed as her own. "And you, Miss Regan, I hope that all your best dreams come true."

He maintained his control until he had managed a very decent exit. But out in the corridor, he leaned against the wall, a very sick man, with ejaculations and questions stabbing him through and through. This, then, was what his long waiting had come to, his hopes and his dreams of a different Mary Regan! This affair with Jack Morton, a good enough fellow of his sort, that was her plan! . . . Yes, but what lay behind that plan? . . . And did she care for Morton? . . . And why had she not frankly written him of her purpose? . . . And Peter Loveman, where did Loveman come in? . . . And Bradley, guide and protector of young Morton, what might be Bradley's part? . . . And what kind of person, after these months, was really behind that exterior which Mary Regan had presented him? . . .

In bitter revulsion Clifford straightened up and walked away. What she was, and what she was doing, and what she had got herself in for, these matters were now none of his affairs. For him Mary Regan was a closed incident.

CHAPTER V

CLIFFORD HAS A NEW PURPOSE

HALF an hour later Clifford entered the octagonal reception room at Police Headquarters and sent his name in to Commissioner Thorne. Word came back that Thorne was engaged and would be so for half an hour; but in the meantime would n't Clifford visit about the building.

Clifford descended to the great corridor on the main floor. Here he met captains and lieutenants and first-grade detectives — old friends, with whom, until the events that had sent him out of the Department, he had worked for close upon a decade. They treated him with a respect that, coming after his scene with Mary Regan, was soothing to his rasped spirit. The very surroundings, too, affected him — begot in him a formless longing; in a way it was like coming back to one's home town.

Here, too, he ran into little Jimmie Kelly. With Jimmie he descended to the pistol range in the subcellar, and for half an hour they practiced with the regulation police revolvers, which recoil like ancient shotguns — their targets those little posters seen everywhere, headed "Wanted for Murder," over the heart of the pictured fugitive an inch circle of white paper to serve as bull's-eye. And then

they practiced with Jimmie's pistol, a .25 automatic so tiny that it could lie in a closed hand and not be seen.

"Wish you were back here with us, Bob," remarked Jimmie when Clifford announced that he was due up in the Chief's office. "It would be great stuff — working with you again!"

There was hearty sincerity in Jimmie's voice; and the vague longing begot by it was still upon Clifford when at length he was seated beside Commissioner Thorne's desk.

"Clifford," said the Commissioner briskly, his lean, Scotch-Irish face alive with purpose, "I'm going to lay all my cards, face up, on the table. I asked you to meet me down here, instead of up town, for the sake of the effect on you. That's why I made you wait, and asked you to visit about. I wanted you to feel the old tug of Headquarters."

"I guess I've felt it all right, Chief."

"That's good. Clifford, six months ago I asked you to become Second Deputy Commissioner. For your own reasons you refused. I hope you've changed your mind, for I'm now again asking you to take the place."

To be Second Deputy Chief of New York's Detective Bureau! — Clifford felt a leaping thrill — a swift reaction from the heaviness and bitterness which had been upon him since his scene with Mary Regan. He considered for a moment. The controlling reason for his previous declination, his knowledge

that Mary Regan would refuse him if he continued official police work because she believed she would interfere with his career — this reason Mary Regan herself had just wiped out. He had lost enough because of her. Here was big work to do. Here was a big career.

Clifford looked up. "I accept, Chief," he said with an energy almost fierce. "And I'm glad and proud to accept. And I'll give the job the best that's in me."

"Bully for you!" cried Thorne, seizing his hand.

There was a minute's further exchange of thanks and congratulations. Then Thorne continued:

"There's a particular situation I want you to take care of. I believe in the need of pleasure as much as any man. But the providing of pleasure in this city has become a vast business. I'm not referring to the theaters; I'm thinking of the restaurants, roof-gardens, dancing places, things like that—high and low. And I'm thinking especially of the swellest places, and of some of the presumably most respectable places. These establishments have bred a new variety of specialists, astute men, astute women, who entangle and victimize the pleasure-seekers. Especially since women began to go about so freely to the dancing places, and it became so easy to make acquaintances, there have developed such opportunities — God, if the public only guessed a tenth of what is dribbling in to us! —and even we never get rumors of a tenth of what actually

happens. But you know this situation better than I do."

"I've had to learn something about it," said Clifford.

"I want the facts. I want the situation cleaned out. You've got a free hand — use as many men as you like — follow your own plans."

"I'll be on the job at once," said Clifford.

"Good stuff!" cried Thorne enthusiastically. "And if you succeed — and I know you will — it will be a big thing for the Department, a big thing for me, and we'll try to make it a big thing for you!"

This new interest so promptly and exactly fitted the sudden emptiness in Clifford's life that almost without thinking he was impelled to ask, "Has anything happened, Chief, to cause you to make me this offer just now?"

Thorne regarded Clifford with a curious, thoughtful air. "I wonder if I should tell you," he said slowly; and then: "Well, the fact is, Clifford, I have been holding a little something back from you."

"Something about what, Chief?"

"About you — and a woman."

"Yes — go on!"

"Six months ago a young woman called on me at my hotel, and asked me if I had offered you the position of Chief of the Detective Bureau. I said that I had, and that you had declined. She then asked me if I still wanted you. I said yes, if I could

get you. That was all that passed between us. She thanked me and went away."

"She was Mary Regan," said Clifford.

"She was."

"And is that all that has happened?"

"To-day I had a note from her, without date or address, advising me to offer you the position again, and to keep on offering it to you until you accepted."

Something was happening within Clifford, though he did not know what it was — something that set brain whirling and heart beating at a swifter tempo. "I just left her," he said with mechanical calm. "She's going to marry a man named Jack Morton."

"So I have just learned."

"How?"

"Some of my men have been covering Bradley and Loveman. Loveman's house telephone is tapped, and a few threads have been picked up. Miss Regan believes she is doing what she is doing because she wants to, and from her own motives. But Bradley and Loveman are behind it."

"In what way?" cried Clifford.

"Bradley, as you know, is a sort of private watchman over young Morton. Loveman has handled a lot of delicate matters for the father. The elder Morton is a ruthless egoist, an able man of big affairs, but remarkable for neither business nor personal morality. The son you are acquainted with. You can see the opportunities here for such a combination as Bradley and Loveman."

"Yes. But where does Mary Regan come in?"

"Bradley and Loveman are using her now, and expect to use her in the future."

"Does she know she is being used?"

"I'm certain she does not even guess it."

"Then how did they ever get her into it this far?"

"I do not know."

"But surely," cried Clifford, "You must have some idea of what their plan is?"

"Only that I surmise that it is one individual case of the general situation concerning which I just spoke to you — about how very clever persons have made a subtle business out of the manner in which the city's Big Pleasure reacts upon human ambitions and human frailties. Any information more definite than this it will be part of your job to get."

Abruptly Clifford stood up and strode to a window and stood gazing vacantly at a huge candy factory across Broome Street — his whole being now wildly athrob, his brain working swiftly though incoherently. What might it not mean, Mary Regan's showing this concern to see that he accepted the position he had once refused because of her? . . . And how much did she really care for Morton? . . . And might there not be motives, deeper and other than he had guessed, that had caused her to treat him so cavalierly? . . . And the menace of Loveman and of Bradley —

Abruptly Clifford turned about on Thorne.

"Chief, I'm sorry to take back my word — but I cannot accept that job as Chief of Detectives."

"Why not?" cried the astounded Thorne.

"That I can't explain just now. But though I can't take the job, I'll do all I can in a personal way to help handle that condition you were speaking about. You'll excuse me, Chief, but I've got to do a lot of quick thinking."

Leaving Thorne fairly gasping at this swift transition, Clifford strode out of the office and out of Police Headquarters. Two minutes later he was in a telephone booth in a saloon across the way and was asking the Grantham Hotel, in which he had left Mary Regan an hour before, for "Mrs. Gardner." Soon Mary's cool, even voice sounded over the wire.

"This is Robert Clifford," he said. "May I see you again — for just a few minutes?"

There was a long silence; then the cool voice queried: "Alone?"

"If you please."

Another silence. He was beginning to fear that she had hung up, when the cool voice spoke again.

"Very well" — and this time he heard the receiver click upon its hook.

He hurried for the Subway. He was athrill with a grim elation. He felt that all that had thus far passed between him and Mary Regan was no more than a prelude — a long prelude, to be sure — and that the big action of their drama lay still before

them. He would fight on, still, for Mary Regan — to save her from herself, to protect her from others!

But in this, his high moment, he had no prevision of the vagaries of a woman's nature he was to encounter — of a willful, many-elemented woman who had not yet found herself, and who had a long road yet to travel before she reached that self-knowledge; and he had no prevision of the strange places behind the scenes of pleasure that his new purpose was to cause him to penetrate, and no prevision of the strange motives, the strange mixtures of human nature, that he was to meet.

CHAPTER VI

MARY SHOWS HER HAND

MARY REGAN stood in the dusk of her sitting-room, holding apart the velvet hangings of a window, and gazing far down at the quadruple line of motor-cars which at this twilight winter hour moves in slow lockstep between Thirty-third and Fifty-ninth Streets; and as she vacantly gazed upon the world's greatest parade of pleasure vehicles, part of her mind was wondering about her approaching interview with Clifford — and part of her mind, in subconscious preparation for this meeting, was automatically reviewing, and checking-up, and re-swearing allegiance to some of the decisions she had reached concerning herself and the course she had chosen. She was somewhat excited; but she felt sure of herself — very sure!

During the six months she had been away, she had studied, or believed she had, her own nature most carefully, and also her immediate interests, and also the bolder reachings of her ambition. She had considered these matters, not sentimentally, — she hated sentiment, she told herself, — but with cool brain, and with no fear to admit the truth. To be sure there had been a swift seizure and possession of her by emotion when she and Clifford had kissed that

summer dawn long ago in Washington Square; and now and again this emotional element had arisen in her with appealing energy, but her cool intelligence had always controlled such impulses. What did life offer with a police official who was on the square? Nothing! At least nothing that she cared for or dreamed of. Honest police officials never got anywhere. And as for Clifford, marriage with him would ruin such career for him as might be possible. It would never do — not for either of them.

What she wanted was altogether different. She *knew*, for she had analyzed herself with the apartness of a scientist. Her former attitude toward crime, acquired through a girlhood spent with those cynical gentlemen of the world, her father and her Uncle Joe, — that attitude to be sure was now changed; at least such intentions as formerly she had had she now knew to be quiescent; Clifford had influenced her to this extent. But though the criminal impulses given her by her training were gone, the worldly attitude and instincts begotten by that training still remained. She believed herself a worldling; and more, she believed herself a competent worldling. She believed she had no illusions about herself. The things in life that were worth while — so in her confident youthfulness she decided — were luxury, admiration, the pleasures that money could buy. And these things she believed she could win.

This much, in her retreat, she had already decided before Jack Morton had appeared in the quiet coun-

tryside. The coming of Jack, with the opportunities represented by his amiable person, had made her even more decided.

And so, as she now gazed down through the winter dusk upon the shifting motor-tops, she was very certain of herself despite her palpitant expectation over Clifford's coming — very confident of herself, and what she was, and what she was going to do, and what she was going to be: just as many another young woman, of a perhaps more careful rearing, was preeningly confident of herself, in those limousines far below her. For this was the time of all times, and the place of all places, that young women were trained to dream of themselves; and here, also, often the dreams came gorgeously true — for a time! . . .

The ring of her apartment bell brought Mary sharply from her thoughts. Switching on the lights, she opened the door and admitted Clifford into her sitting-room. She spoke first, with a formality that held him at a distance.

"I consented to see you because an hour or two ago you discovered a private matter of mine, and I neglected to ask you to keep it silent."

"You refer to your engagement to Jack Morton?"

"I do. Of course you will say nothing about it."

"That you must leave to my discretion."

"You mean you are going to tell?" she demanded.

He tried to keep his business here to the front of his mind, but now, as he sat face to face with her,

the old question recurred for which he seemed able to reach no final answer: what was she really like beneath this exterior she showed him? — what might she be beneath and within the self she supposed herself to be?

"I mean that I am reserving the right to do exactly what I please," he replied, looking at her squarely. "This business of your secret engagement is also what made me want to see you — but it is only one of many things. I have done a lot of thinking since I left you two hours ago. Also I have just seen Police Commissioner Thorne."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Thorne honored me by offering me the position of Chief of the Detective Bureau. I accepted the position —"

"Then I suppose I should address you as — By the way, just how should one address you?"

"But I immediately withdrew my acceptance," he continued, ignoring the cool irony which seemed to come automatically into her voice whenever they met. "I refused because of certain things I learned from Thorne about you."

"About me? What are they?"

"That's what I want to learn more about — and from you."

"Ah — then you still are a detective?"

"I suppose I am," still ignoring the irony of her tone. "But just now I primarily am a person who is interested in his own affairs as a man."

"Your affairs?" she questioned.

"Just now your affairs have become my affairs. And I'm hoping that you'll help me by frankly answering my questions."

"Questions about what?"

"About yourself."

"Such as?"

"Instead of leaving it for me to discover by accident, why did you not frankly tell me of your intention to marry some one else? — when you knew what for six months I had been hoping for. How much do you care for Jack Morton?"

His determined face, and the flashing memories of what he had tried to do for her, checked the sharp replies that instinctively started for her lips. The steady gaze of his intense eyes sent a warm tremor through her, gave her a swift, tingling pleasure. But that very pleasure was a warning to her: such feeling in her was only aberration — the life signs of some of her less important elements, which she had adjudged to be a menace to her success and which she must therefore suppress. The next moment she had full control of herself — and she had decided on what should be her course with him.

"You seem to regard me as a mystery," she remarked with tantalizing coolness.

"You are one — in a degree. And I want it solved."

"There is nothing in the least mysterious about me," she said in her even tone. "I'll tell you all you

need to know. You may be seated if you like." And after they were both in chairs: "First about Mr. Morton. He is a pleasant, agreeable gentleman. He has money and position."

"You love him?"

"I like him."

"You are marrying him, then, because it is a good business proposition — to put it brutally."

She met his flushed face calmly. "That is not putting it brutally. Rather, it is merely putting it honestly." This she had decided must be made the final interview between them. "I told you, when you were here two hours ago, that I had discovered that I am not at all the woman you believed lay undeveloped in me. You may call me worldly — selfish — ambitious. And you will be tremendously right."

He looked at her hard, and was silent a moment. "But that is n't answering my first question and all it implied: why did n't you write me before you returned to New York? Why did n't you frankly tell me of your intended marriage?"

She lifted her shoulders ever so slightly. "It must have been because I never thought of it."

He flushed, but she met his look with unabashed composure. She had lied, but she had lied easily, for the lie had been carefully premeditated. When, during her absence, her mind's decision had gone against Clifford, she had considered what would be the most effective method of giving undebatable

conclusion to the affair; and had decided upon this course that she had followed. No need for letters — no chance for sentimental pleading to alter her mind; it would be all over, and ended, before he knew a thing. Further, since the break had to come, it appealed to her pride to seem superior and indifferent.

Clifford was angry, but he contained himself. "To go on: was your meeting with Mr. Morton in that out-of-the-way spot, Pine Mountain Lodge, pure coincidence as he said? — or did cunning brains bring it about?"

"You mean, my cunning brains?" Two spots of conscious color appeared in her cheeks.

"I do not mean you. Did some one else, perhaps without your knowledge at the time, plan that you should meet?"

"What are you driving at?" she demanded sharply.

"I don't know myself yet — exactly."

"Who could have planned our meeting? As you know, I went to Pine Mountain Lodge to be alone. Mr. Morton, not knowing of my presence there or even of my existence, came to Pine Mountain to rest up. We could n't help meeting, since the lodge is the only place at which one can stay. That's all there is to this amazing mystery."

"Undoubtedly all you see. But the coincidence explanation does n't explain everything. Some one may have been behind Jack Morton's going."

"Who? In what way? And for what reason?"

"Those are things to be found out." He looked at her steadily for a moment. "I asked you this before, but I am going to ask it again: why are you here in hiding?"

"After all, I guess I don't mind telling you in the least," she returned coolly, with a sudden perverse gratification in revealing what she knew he could not like in her. Also she felt that here was another detail by which she could make Clifford feel the utter finality of the break between them. "Jack and I came to New York intending to be married the next day. But the very evening of the day we arrived, Jack's father unexpectedly came to town and appeared at the Biltmore where Jack is staying."

"Was that before or after the evening I saw you at the Grand Alcazar with Mr. Loveman?"

"You saw me there the evening of the day of my return. Jack was to have had dinner with me that night," she added, "and had reserved the table and had asked his friend, Mr. Loveman, and then he got tangled up with a friend and could not come. It was that same evening that his father arrived in town. I believe this is simple and clear."

"As far as it goes. But why did you go into hiding?"

"Is n't that rather obvious?" she returned with her cool frankness. "Jack and I were going to keep our marriage secret — perhaps for a long time. The appearance of his father, with the announcement that he was going to stay with Jack, naturally de-

layed our marriage. I insisted that it be postponed until his father was away and there was no danger of immediate discovery."

"And Jack?"

"Jack was reckless. He was all for getting married right away. But I refused to take the risk. Also, under the circumstances, it did n't seem particularly wise to give the father a chance to find out about me by our appearing openly together."

"But you yourself could have gone out openly alone, or with friends."

"Oh, of course," she said dryly — "and have run the risk of Jack and his father seeing me in public, and learning all about me. No, thank you —the only way for me has been to keep under cover for the present."

Clifford had felt a great start, but he had suppressed it; and he managed to say quite casually: "Of course Jack Morton does n't know who you really are?"

"Of course not. Oh, I don't mind so much what he might learn about me," she added, a bit defiantly. "You police have nothing on me — not in the way of a conviction, anyhow. But it would not help particularly if he learned who my father had been, and that Joe Russell is my uncle, and that my brother is Slant-Face Regan."

"But he'll be sure to learn some day."

"By that time he'll have become so attached to me that it'll not make much difference."

"But there's his father. What about what'll happen when he finds out? All Jack's money comes through his father."

"Oh, his father will come around in the end. You see he's not to know till we get ready."

Clifford looked at her for a long moment of silence.

"I know what you're thinking; you're thinking I'm just another adventuress," she said with a shrug. "But what of that? Every woman is an adventuress who is trying to better her position and who is using her head to do it. And that's just what every woman is doing!"

"I was not thinking chiefly of that; I was thinking of Peter Loveman. Did he suggest that you go into hiding?"

"When Jack told him of our engagement, he said he did n't want to know anything about it, he wanted to keep out of any such affair. But when he learned Jack's father was in town, he telephoned me to keep out of the way."

"You've known Loveman some time?"

"Since I came back to America. He's been Uncle Joe's lawyer; and naturally they're friends."

"And he could have known you were in Pine Mountain Lodge?"

"Of course Uncle Joe might have told him."

Clifford considered a moment. "Tell me, just what has Mr. Loveman had to do with this affair?"

"I have already told you everything I know."

Clifford was convinced that in this she was telling

him the truth. But all his senses informed him that somewhere, working in some manner, behind this affair was Peter Loveman, playing with his master's subtlety upon human frailties, passions, and ambitions. Undoubtedly Mary Regan was being used. Undoubtedly also Commissioner Thorne had been right when he had declared that Mary Regan had no suspicion that she was being used, that she believed that whatever she was doing she was doing of her own free will.

He had put to her all the questions he had intended; and as for a moment he sat gazing at her — so composed, so worldly-looking, and so very young to be saying such things as she had just said — the more personal questions, which had shaken him so often, throbbed through him like so many gigantic and fiery pulse-beats: Was she through and through and unchangeably this worldly, calculating Mary Regan that she had so carefully depicted for him — or was it all just a pose? Or might she believe herself sincere in this sophistication — and yet deep down in her might there be the living essence of a very different Mary Regan that she tried to deny and ignore? He could not forget that moment in Washington Square when her soul had seemed unlocked; he could not forget her kiss . . .

Clifford stood up as though his intention was to leave. She also rose. His trifling strategy achieved its end — physical proximity and the chance which sitting at formal distance in chairs did not permit.

Suddenly he gripped her two shoulders; and the energy and purpose and feeling which he had kept in restraint during the past minutes now burst forth.

"Listen to me, Mary Regan," he declared tensely. "You are not going to marry Jack Morton! You hear me!"

She was so startled at the change in him that she was hardly aware of the hands clutching her shoulders. "Why not?"

His words rushed out. "I'm not going to say anything about it's not being square. He's not good enough for you! Oh, I don't mean to run down a man I've called my friend. Jack Morton is pleasant enough in his way. And you've seen him at his best — away from the lights and Big Pleasure, when he was on his good behavior — and there are few men who can be more agreeable than Jack Morton. But Broadway is likely to get hold of him again! And girls! — no girl is pretty to him for more than six months, and every pretty girl is prettier than the last pretty girl! It's just the way Jack is made — or the way this town has made him. I tell you it's an awful mistake!"

"It's my own mistake I'm making!" Her dark eyes flashed at him. "Take off your hands!"

Instead he clutched her all the tighter. "There's a bigger reason than the mistake. Mary, you love me!"

"Love you!" she ejaculated.

"Yes, you love me, and you know you love me!"

he declared masterfully. The impulse was upon him to sweep her from her announced determination by dominating her with a swift power comprised of his own longing for her and her reawakened liking for him. "You know you love me, or why did you see Commissioner Thorne about me six months ago, and why did you to-day suggest to him that he again offer me the place of Chief of the Detective Bureau? You love me, and you thought your marriage to me might injure my public career. You don't care how much marriage to Jack Morton may injure him. Don't you think I see through you? Don't you think I understand? You're not going to marry Jack Morton! You're going to marry me!"

She had paled — and her dark eyes, of a brown that was almost a black, were fixed upon him widely, in what might have been fear, or bewilderment, or fascination, or all of these — and he felt a trembling go through her body. For a long moment they stood tensely thus: he hoping that he had carried the day — and at the same time poignantly wondering what she was about to say or do.

"You are going to marry me! You are going to marry me!" he repeated after the manner of those who seek to work miracles by the power of a forcefully iterated idea.

He felt her body grow taut; and the startled look of her face gave place to composed decision. That moment he knew that he had lost — for this day at least.

"Please remove your hands!" she commanded in a quiet, edged voice.

He did not at once obey; his faculties were still so engaged with his struggle to turn her aside, and with his failure, that he scarcely heard her.

"Please remove your hands!" she repeated, her voice not going up by so much as a semi-tone.

His hands fell to his sides.

"Despite what you say, Mr. Clifford," she continued in the same even voice of calm decision, "I am not going to marry you, and I am going to marry Mr. Morton."

He was composed again. "Perhaps you may never marry me," he returned grimly. "But you certainly will never marry Jack Morton."

"And why not?"

"Because I shall prevent it."

"How?"

"By any and whatever means seem most effective."

Her gaze sharpened. Then the red of anger faintly tinted the tawny satin of her cheek.

"You mean to say you would be low enough to tell Jack or his father about me and my family?"

He looked her straight in the face. "You have admitted that that procedure might be effective."

"You would n't dare do that!" And she seized his arm with a grasp no less intense than his of a minute before, and glared at him.

"I'll do exactly what may be necessary, Miss Regan."

"You — you —" she gasped. "You have no right to interfere in my affairs!"

"There is far more to this affair than just *You*, Miss Regan." With an almost impersonal movement he removed her hand from his arm and let it fall. "I must be going. But do not forget for a moment that I am going to prevent your marriage, and prevent it in whatever way will be most effective."

He bowed slightly. Standing just where he had left her, she watched him go out, within her a dazed commotion of surprise, consternation, suspense — and, strangely, not quite so high an anger toward Clifford as she had felt two moments before.

CHAPTER VII

NINA CORDOVA

YES, he must prevent this marriage, he must block Loveman, he must find out Loveman's plan, and he must do all quickly — but how? To warn the Mortons would achieve some of these ends; but he had a strong repugnance to this procedure. He would only play this as his last card.

Clifford thought of Slant-Face; but he realized that Slant-Face would probably have no influence with his sister, and possibly the ex-pickpocket might even regard the affair from Mary's viewpoint. Also he thought of her Uncle Joe; but the same objection held true regarding him, and also the width of the continent made him unavailable. As for Commissioner Thorne, he could not be of service in the present stage of affairs. And then Clifford thought of Uncle George. Uncle George might possibly give suggestions, for Uncle George knew as much about the pleasure life (and what lay beneath it) of Broadway and of Broadway's closest territorial relative, Fifth Avenue between the Waldorf and St. Patrick's Cathedral, as any other hundred men in New York put together.

An hour after leaving Mary, Clifford sat in the Grand Alcazar restaurant, looking into the bland,

genial, cunning, loose-skinned old face. He had just finished telling Uncle George of his discovery of the whereabouts of Mary Regan and the other events of the day.

The old man regarded Clifford with meditative, puckered gaze — a gaze of somewhat peculiar effect, begotten by his lack of eyebrows and eyelashes. "Son," he began slowly, "the thing that stands out in this chunk of *vers libre* you've been handing me, is the fact that you're so stuck on that little dame Mary Regan —"

"Let's leave me, and what I may think of her, out of it," put in Clifford.

"Don't interrupt, son. You ask me a thing and you've got to let me spiel along in my own way" — which, indeed, was one of the difficulties not to be avoided in consulting Uncle George. "Now, you listen to me, son, and you'll hear something out of the original book out of which old Solomon and those other wise guys that have been playing big time steady for three or four thousand years swiped all their good gags. Son, you're too damned monogamous! You're insulting God: what the hell d' you suppose he made so many pretty girls for? — and let the others get wise on how to make themselves pretty? Now, I like Mary Regan as well as any male person can who's not her relative and who's not trying to be — but if she tried any of that beautiful female cussedness on me, I'd throw her one smiling kiss, mail her a picture post-card of the jumping-off

place, and proceed to admire some of the other works of God."

Uncle George nodded, and started to sip his white wine thinned with sparkling water.

"Thanks, Uncle George. But let's get back —"

"Hold on, son. That was just my first sentence. Supposing Mary Regan is trying to put something across by holding back a little of the truth — sort of saving it up for a rainy day. Well, what of that? Ain't we all liars? You take it from your Uncle George, a superannuated old burglar, president emeritus of that grand old *alma mater*, the University of Broadway, who's played every kind of game with every kind of male and female now decorating this earth — take it from me, son, I've never seen the strait and narrow road of truth congested with the traffic. That's one road you can speed on, and not even see a cop. So, son, if Mary Regan has been like the rest of us, don't hold it especially against her. And her marrying Jack Morton by holding back a bit of the evidence, it's not going to hurt him such a lot."

"I'm thinking of what it may do to her."

"Why, now, son, a marriage now and then seems to improve a lot of women. And the only time a few marriages seem to be a handicap to some women is when they undertake to sign their names in full."

"You're in very good voice this evening, Uncle George. But, if you don't mind, let's talk about how to stop that marriage, and how to find out Loveman's game."

"All right — all right. Now, let's see. You know Nina Cordova, star of that new musical show that's a sure-fire frost — what is it?"

"'Orange Blossoms.' Yes, I know of her."

"Then you'll remember that in young Morton's previous Broadway incarnation he had an affair with her — which little Nina broke off sharp and sudden when she got the chance a year ago at the star's part in 'The Bridal Wreath'? She's a live proposition: why not inject her into the affair?"

"I've thought of that," said Clifford.

"H'm. Well, then," Uncle George meditated, "you remember how Jack Morton, when he was along here before, used to like his little quart or two or three of champagne?—and how he behaved when he was all lit up? Why not kidnap him from Bradley, give him a chance to be his real self again, and then ship him to Mary? This different Jack Morton might make her stop and think. Or send him along to his old man — and when his old man saw how the kid had broken training he might do what he's threatened, stop Jack's dough; and this might be enough of a jolt to make Mary call the thing off."

"I've thought of those things, too."

"You seem to have thought of everything," half grumbled Uncle George. "Well, what's the matter with these ways?"

"For one thing, it would take time to put them across. I've got to act quickly, for there's no telling

what she'll do. Besides, before I take any action, I'd like to learn how she got into this matter; I'd like to learn just what Loveman's and Bradley's part in the game has been, just what they plan to make of it in the future."

"I get you," nodded Uncle George. "So that you can plan your action accordingly. But that's some job, son, — getting in on the inside of the game of such a pair as Bradley and Loveman."

"I know it. It can only be done indirectly." Clifford regarded Uncle George thoughtfully for a moment, then suddenly asked: "Do you know Jack Morton's father?"

"I've met him."

"Know him well enough to get into a friendly talk with him?"

"Son," demanded Uncle George in an aggrieved tone, "you mean to insult me by asking if I need even to have seen a man before to be his best friend inside of thirty minutes — me that could go out now and sell old Andy Carnegie's pig-iron billets back to him as gold-bricks!" Uncle George looked at his watch. "Father Morton is staying at the Biltmore. It's now six-twenty. I've noticed that he leads himself into the smoking-room at six-thirty for a cocktail. I feel a craving for a Biltmore cocktail. Son, just where is that building lot in North River located that you want me to sell him?"

"Could you steer the talk around to his son — make him doubt Bradley a bit — say something

good about me — and implant in him the idea that he ought to consult me?"

"Could I? Why don't you write me an act that'd bring out my talents? It's already done — what you going to do next?"

"That depends on whether Mr. Morton comes to see me, and whether I get anything out of him."

Uncle George heaved himself to his feet. "Come on, son, see me safe aboard a taxi." Outside, in the cab, he reached forth and laid a hand on Clifford's shoulder. "Remember, son, there's just as good mermaids in the sea as have ever been caught."

"*Bon voyage*," said Clifford as the car started.

The old man, winking a genial, satyr-like wink, blew Clifford a kiss through the open window.

At half-past ten that night Clifford sat at a little table in the Gold Room at the Grantham. There had come a message from Uncle George that he should be in this room at this hour. Beyond this the message had said nothing.

Clifford had wandered through the score of big public rooms that comprised the first two floors of the Grantham — the lounges, the parlors, the half-dozen restaurants — with the feverish hope that he might glimpse Mary Regan (so little effect had Uncle George's wisdom had upon him!), but with no idea of what he should do or say should he see her. He had had an impulse to call again at her suite, but had restrained himself from that folly. He now glanced through the slowly filling Gold

Room, but he did not sight her. He wondered just where she was — what she was thinking of — what she was planning. Should he, if all other methods failed, block her worldly plans and the as yet unpenetrated scheme of Loveman and Bradley by telling the Mortons who she was? He felt himself a cad whenever he thought of it; but, yes, if he had to, he would do it! . . .

A hand fell upon his shoulder. "Wake up there, you old crystal-gazer!" called a cheerful voice.

Clifford looked up. Smiling down on him was a cherubic face: a somewhat elderly cherub, to be sure, since where usually there is the adornment of divine curls there was the glaze of baldness.

"Sit down, Loveman, and join me in a drink."

"I'm afraid of you, my boy," answered the famous little lawyer. "You might put poison in my cup."

"Why?"

"Because I lied to you — you see, I'm not waiting to be accused," the other smiled affably. "I told you I did n't know where Mary Regan was, and after that you followed me and I led you right to her. She telephoned me about your finding her. You sure caught me dead to rights."

"I'm afraid I can't do anything with you, Loveman, — though that was the second fib you told me about her."

"Both gentleman's lies — told for a lady's sake," amiably explained Loveman. "She did n't want her

whereabouts known. But now that you've found her, what're you going to do?"

"I don't know that I can do anything." And then Clifford chanced a shot. "You see, I learned that she is secretly engaged to Jack Morton."

"You don't say!" exclaimed the little man. "That is astounding! Well, well — I'll have a look into that and see what's to be done."

He rubbed his shining crown in bewildered thoughtfulness, — Clifford had to admire his art as an actor, — then again was smiling.

"Wish you'd join me after a while at supper, Clifford. Little party I'm giving Nina Cordova — got to cheer her up a bit, you understand. You know 'Orange Blossoms' is one God-awful flivver, and Nina, poor orphan-child, don't know what to do. Gee, but it's a rotten show, and what it did n't do to kill itself Nina did for it: she sure is one musical-comedy prima donna that ought to be seen and not heard! And even at that, seen too oft, familiar with her face — oh, go ask the box-office man to finish the quotation. So I'm giving her this little party to boost her spirits — though why should n't somebody be giving me a party to cheer me up for the twenty thousand United States of America dollars that dropped through the bottom of that show?" He gave a moan of mock self-sympathy. "Well, you'll join us when the crowd blows in?"

"Thanks, but I'm waiting for a friend."

"Break away if you can; be glad to have you."

Clifford watched the strange little notable, behind whose light chatter he knew to be the cleverest legal brain of its sort in New York, cross to a small corner table, which was reserved for him every night and was known to the waiters here as "Mr. Loveman's table." He saw Loveman converse in turn with various people, and in a general way he understood; for at this table, during the play hours of the night, Loveman transacted many of the affairs too delicate to be brought to his office or his apartment. And he saw Loveman, while he chatted, gaze about upon those gathering for supper and dancing. There were people here whose family names were daily in the society and Wall Street columns — most of them here with no intent more reprehensible than the restless search for pleasure, which in this our present day has become public pleasure. Loveman smiled on them most kindly: as why should n't he, thought Clifford, since many of them were working for him, though they guessed it not?

Loveman's party now arrived and were seating themselves at a large table directly beside the dancing-floor. There were Jack Morton, his father, Nina Cordova, two other actresses, and half a dozen men and women of the smart young society set. Loveman was at his best, keeping his party in highest spirits: no man in New York was his superior as midnight host.

As Clifford watched the gay supper progress, he wondered what other of these guests the gay Love-

man might be deftly drawing into some distant entanglement.

Presently some one took the chair opposite Clifford. It was Uncle George; and Uncle George gave him a slight wink of a lashless eye.

"While we're on the subject, son," the old man began, "I might remark that I put a bee in little Nina's bonnet."

"Just what have you got me here for?" demanded Clifford.

"It's always worth while, son, to watch Loveman improve each midnight hour. See how he smiles and talks — and yet, God, how he's working! But you're here, son, because of Father Morton; and also, perhaps, to see if Nina's bee buzzes. How about splitting fifty-fifty on a ham sandwich?"

As the two ate the best supper Uncle George could order, Clifford kept his eyes on Loveman's party. They were now leaving the table in couples to dance. Nina Cordova, a slender blonde with a soft, appealing face and quick, bright eye, was with Jack Morton; dancing was something they both did well; and it was easy to see that the slender prima donna had more than a dancing interest in her partner. Then Loveman danced with her; and in the middle of the dance they halted beside Clifford's table.

"Finish this with me, Uncle George," coaxed the little star.

"My dear child," returned the old man, "if

you'd spoken to me a little earlier, say bout 1871, I'd have danced with you till that orchestra dropped dead. But now, why, I'd just fall apart on the floor. Ask Clifford there."

She smiled at Clifford and the next moment he was fox-trotting with her. She was certainly a marvel of a dancer; also, beneath her *ingénue* surface, she had a keen brain of her own sort; and in her light chatter as they swung about he sensed that she was trying to search his mind — and he sensed also that she was doing this at the instigation of Loveman. But he parried so well that he believed she did not even know he was fencing.

"Clever girl, Uncle George," he said when he was back at his table.

"Son, you said something then," affirmed the old man. "Unless my hunch works wrong you'll some day find her mixed up in this affair; and when you do meet up with her, son, you'd better forget that, according to the date written down in her press-agent's Bible, that dear little child is only twenty-one."

Clifford looked over at her thoughtfully. She danced half a dozen dances with Jack Morton; and Clifford, watching everything, guessed that the elder Morton was none too pleased. And then she danced again with Loveman; and he saw that she was talking imperiously to the little lawyer; and if only he could have overheard he might have given more weight to Uncle George's prediction that Nina

Cordova was to play some considerable part before the final curtain fell.

"Peter," she was saying, "since 'Orange Blossoms' is such a fizzle, I'm going to quit the show business, and marry some nice young man."

"But, my child, your art!" protested Loveman.

"My art be damned!" replied the pretty one. "And, Peter, I've decided that the nice young man will be Jack Morton."

Loveman gave her a sharp look. But if he felt any alarm, his voice gave no evidence of it.

"Better think again, dearie. He'll not have forgotten the way you threw him down."

"Give me a week and I'll make him forget it," she returned confidently.

"If you are set on getting married, Nina dear, I'll help you find another candidate," said Loveman in his soft, advisory tone. "This town's full of rich young fellows. Just look 'em over, make your choice, and I'll help you out with the rest."

"I don't want any other!"

"I don't think Jack Morton will do, my dear."

"Why not?"

"I think, dearie, that there are other arrangements —"

"You mean that you have other arrangements!" she said sharply.

"There now, dearie, don't get excited. This town's full of nice men —"

"You can't bluff me, Peter! I see through you —

you don't want me to marry Jack." The little *ingénue* was suddenly a little fury — but a composed fury. "Peter, I know a lot," she said quietly, "and unless you behave about the way I want you to, I may do something that won't make you awfully happy."

There was no mistaking the threat in that voice, and that threat was not to be underrated. Loveman had no intention of yielding; the situation required careful handling and perhaps quick action elsewhere; in the meantime the thing to do was to temporize.

"All right, dearie, — we'll fix it up," he said soothingly. "There's Jack Morton waiting for us; I'll turn you right over to him."

As Clifford saw Nina and young Morton begin a fox-trot, a passing waiter handed Clifford a card. On it was engraved, "*Mr. James Morton,*" and around the name was scribbled, "Wait for me in the lounge just off the bar."

Clifford descended to the Grantham's lounge, which was fitted in the manner of the smartest and most exclusive of men's clubs. Five minutes later Mr. Morton entered and came straight to him. Clifford had already made his private estimate of this man with the graying hair and distinguished face: a man whose habit it was to buy men, — and women, too, — use them, and when finished with them, throw them aside without a thought and go on his way.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Clifford," he began, when they were seated in deep chairs beside a little table. "They say you are a detective who's absolutely on the square."

"Thank you," said Clifford.

"I did n't call you down to pay you compliments," the other said incisively, eyeing him keenly, "so I'll go right to the point. You know my son?"

"Yes."

"It's about Jack I want to see you." Mr. Morton spoke in the compact sentences of a master of affairs. "I guess you know he's been some trouble. I'm certain something's in the air now. I don't know whether it's that Miss Cordova or something else. I can't get anything out of Jack. I've been having him looked over by a private detective; you know him — Bradley; but Bradley does n't seem to be able to learn anything either. I'm not one hundred per cent trustful of Bradley: set a detective to catch a detective — that might prove a good idea. Will you undertake the job? — finding out about Bradley, and finding out about my son?"

"I can't say until I know the situation." Here was opening before him the chance he had been working for, but Clifford managed to speak composedly. "If you don't mind telling me, just how do things stand?"

"If you know Jack, you know what his idea of living in New York was a year or six months ago. I could n't leave my affairs and come here to look

after him. I ordered my lawyer, Mr. Loveman, to take whatever steps were necessary. It was absolutely essential that Jack should take a brace —"

"Pardon me. Aside from the moral reasons, were there any other reasons for your wanting Jack to change his habits?"

"There was, and still is, an engagement with a young woman back in Chicago. Not exactly an engagement, rather an understanding between the families. The match could not be more desirable; the young lady has everything."

"Pardon me — do I know the young lady you refer to?"

"You may have heard of her. Her father is Sherwood Jones. She is Miss Maisie Jones."

"I have seen her picture in the illustrated Sunday supplements — among prominent young society girls."

"Then you can partially understand why I consider the match so desirable. But the family at that time objected, and still objects — until Jack proves that he has settled down. Three months ago I came East and delivered an ultimatum."

"In the presence of Jack alone?" Clifford put in gently.

"No. Mr. Loveman had been doing his best to control the boy. Naturally he was present."

"And the ultimatum?"

"I said that he either had to take a brace or I was through with him."

"Let's see whether I get the general idea." Clifford was moving forward carefully. "If Jack did n't brace up, he'd have to earn his own money. On the other hand, if he did brace up, the idea was that he was to quit New York and marry the young lady you have referred to."

"That's it exactly."

"Did you suggest any particular plan for his bracing up?"

"I said he had to spend a period at some quiet place far away from New York."

"And what did Mr. Loveman think of this idea?"

"He thought it was just the plan. In fact he said he knew the very place for Jack to go to — Pine Mountain Lodge."

"Then he suggested Pine Mountain Lodge?"

"Yes."

Clifford was silent a moment.

"You have told Mr. Loveman and Mr. Bradley of your intention to consult me?"

"No."

"I suggest that you do not. Is there any other information you can give me?"

"Nothing else that's definite. But I suspect a lot, and I want to find out what's doing. Will you take the case?"

Clifford spoke guardedly, masking his dislike for the ruthless man before him. "I prefer not to consider myself retained by you until I am certain I can

serve you. I'll have to think the situation over, and let you know later."

It was little that Mr. Morton had told Clifford, yet, after Morton had left him, that little set Clifford's mind going like a racer. He sat thinking — thinking; and after a time he began to perceive dim outlines of what Loveman's plan might be. And as with growing excitement he began to see, he began also to consider what his own course should be. . . .

He looked at his watch. It was half-past three. He started back for the Gold Room, but on the way up he saw Loveman and his party leaving. He quickly secured his coat and hat and followed them out just in time to see Loveman go off in a taxi with Nina Cordova. He was after them in another taxi, a discreet block behind. Five minutes later Loveman set Miss Cordova down at her hotel, and went on to his own home.

Clifford dismissed his taxi, waited ten minutes, then crossed and entered Loveman's apartment house.

CHAPTER VIII

IN LOVEMAN'S LIBRARY

THE drowsy elevator boy carried Clifford to the eleventh floor, and Clifford rang Loveman's bell. After a moment the door was opened by Loveman's Japanese butler, to whom Clifford, after stepping in, gave his card. The little Oriental, showing no slightest surprise at a call at such an hour, disappeared noiselessly through a door; and reappeared after a brief delay and held the door open as a sign that Clifford was to enter.

Clifford stepped through the doorway and found himself in the large richly furnished library of Peter Loveman. Loveman, in a rope-girdled dressing-gown and with his tonsured head looking very much a jolly little monk, crossed the room with smiling hospitality. In a deep, tapestried chair, wearing a dinner jacket, sat the square figure of Bradley.

"This is a surprise, Clifford!" cried Loveman, taking his hand. "And a pleasure, too, — also a relief: dropping in on a pair of grouches, just as they were getting ready to murder each other to drive dull care away. You there, you other grouch," — to Bradley, — "say good-evening to our relief expedition."

Bradley, without rising, nodded curtly. Clifford gave back a similar greeting.

"Off with your overcoat, Clifford," the little man said briskly, "and make yourself comfortable."

"I'll keep it on, Loveman. I can only stay a few minutes."

"Well, anyhow, sit down," and Loveman pushed him into a chair and gestured toward a little table on which stood bottles and glasses and siphons. "All the ingredients here of the Fountain of Perpetual Youth: what'll you have — high-ball, cocktail, liqueur — or shall I have Oni bring you a split of champagne?"

"Thanks, I'm not drinking to-night."

"Smoke, then?" offering cigars and cigarettes.

"No, thank you."

"Say, you're making a host look dam' inhospitable," humorously complained the little man. "How about a little whist? I'll run the dummy. Bradley there loves it: he's acting vice-chairman of the Daughters of Brooklyn Memorial and Bridge Associ—"

"Cut it out!" growled Bradley. "Ask him what he wants."

"Pardon him, Clifford: Bradley's a gentleman of no social parts. But since he has mentioned the point — is there anything special you came for?"

"I came to talk," said Clifford.

"Talk — good! Talking's my trade!" Loveman drew up a chair, so that the three of them formed a square, the table of bottles filling the fourth side. "Let 'er go — guest has the opening speech."

"I suppose, Clifford, that this is where you'd like

to have me make a quick exit," said Bradley — and he crossed his legs, folded his arms, bit upon his invariable big cigar, and gave Clifford a challenging look.

"On the other hand, Bradley," Clifford returned, "I count it luck that I found you here, and I beg you as a favor to remain. Bradley, Loveman," he said sharply, "I've come here for a showdown — to tell you that I'm on to your little game!"

"Our game?" queried Loveman, with puzzled blandness.

"Your game with Mary Regan and the Mortons."

"Indeed!" Loveman said softly. "Now, I wonder if you'd mind giving a little information to an ignorant man?"

Bradley's face had suddenly become hard; his little eyes were gleaming. But though Loveman's manner was blandly puzzled, Clifford knew the little lawyer was as alertly watchful of him as was Bradley — and was as much to be watched.

"I'll put all my cards on the table, Loveman," he said with deliberation. "I'll tell you exactly what I know — which is also exactly what you know. There's nothing at all extraordinary about it; it's just the sort of thing that with a few variations you're doing over and over."

"Oh, I say, am I really so monotonous!" protested Loveman.

"You said you were going to put your cards on the table," cut in Bradley. "Come on, let's see your two-spots."

"We'll go back a bit, Loveman," said Clifford. "Morton, senior, had entrusted you with the legal end of some of his New York affairs; and when Jack Morton came to New York, and began to get himself tangled up through having too much money, the father put it up to you to extricate his son. Good profit in handling such affairs, Loveman: nice fee for legal services rendered; a private split of the sums for which the matters were settled; and an unobtrusive arrangement whereby the son could be drawn into further profitable predicaments. A big-paying business, Loveman."

"Go on," said the little lawyer pleasantly.

"Three or four months ago the father descended upon New York in a fury. He declared he was through settling for Jack's troubles. He was going to send Jack somewhere far away from New York — and Jack had to take a brace, or the father would drop him. Also there was a marriage with a rich girl that the father wanted to put across — and there'd be nothing doing unless Jack straightened up. So Jack simply had to be braced up. Right there, Loveman, was where you saw yourself losing a big piece of your income. But you did some quick thinking, and you fell in with the father's idea that Jack should be sent into retirement to reform. In fact, you knew the very place, Pine Mountain Lodge. And on your suggestion Jack was sent there."

"And if I did mention Pine Mountain Lodge, what of that?" Loveman mildly inquired.

"You knew Mary Regan was there, and knew she was the only attractive woman staying at the hotel. And you knew that Jack Morton fell for about every pretty woman that he met. Thrown together in that isolation, you had n't a doubt of what he would do. It was only a chance — but it was *your only chance;* and if it worked out the way you thought it might, there would be rich possibilities in the situation for you — without your seeming to have been mixed in the affair. Well, it worked out just as you thought it might — and the possibilities lie ready to your hand."

"In case I 'm overlooking anything good," Loveman remarked in the same gentle voice, "would you mind telling me just what these possibilities are?"

"Of course the marriage had to be secret; otherwise the possibilities would have been cut down by two thirds. First item, after the marriage had taken place, there was the possibility of getting hush money out of Mary Regan by threatening to expose her. You would never have appeared in this; Bradley would have attended to this detail — perhaps through one of his men. Second, after you had exhausted the possibilities of blackmail, the next step would have been to inform the father that you suspected something was wrong with Jack. The father would order the matter looked into; you would engage Bradley for the job, and after a lengthy examination Bradley would report a secret marriage — a big bill for detective services. Third, you would then

be retained to annul the marriage — and a big fee there. Well, Loveman, Bradley," he ended grimly, "I believe that's just about the outline of this particular sweet little game!"

Bradley was glaring at him, his square jaws clamped upon his cigar. Little Loveman, still with his affable look, was twirling the tasseled end of his girdle around a chubby forefinger.

"You're very ingenious, very imaginative, Clifford. But granting for the moment that you are correct, what next?"

Clifford leaned sharply forward. "You are not going through with it! I'm going to stop you!"

Clifford gazed tensely at the two men. A slight quivering ran through Bradley's frame; his cigar fell, bitten through; his small, brilliant eyes were points of vicious flame. Loveman still twirled the end of his girdle, but now a bit more slowly. And thus the three sat for several moments.

Then suddenly, without warning of word, seemingly without any preliminary motion, Bradley's powerful body launched itself from a sitting posture straight at Clifford. Clifford started to rise, and instinctively threw up his arms; but to no avail, for Bradley's big hands broke past his weak defense and gripped his throat. His chair went toppling over, the table with its cargo of liquors went crashing to the floor, and Clifford was carried resistlessly backward by the force of Bradley's lunge, until he came up against the great library table. Over this he toppled,

his spine against the table's edge, and Bradley drove his head down upon the wood with a terrific thump.

"You'll stop nothing!" grated Bradley. "You've butted into my affairs for the last time!"

Clifford tried to struggle free, but he was caught at too hopeless a disadvantage — his spine upon the edge of the table, Bradley's weight crushing upon him, and that pair of hands clutching his throat. He could move only his arms, and those to no purpose; he could not cry out; he could not breathe. As his chest heaved for lack of air, he read his doom in the deadly fury of Bradley's face. And he realized, even could he call for help, the futility of such an outcry in this apartment at the top of a lofty building, at this heavily slumbrous hour of four.

He had been faintly conscious of hurried fumblings about the desk — of the snap of a lock — of the whine of a sliding drawer. Now, suddenly, as his wide eyes were growing bleared, he saw a dark something appear between his face and the face of Bradley a bare two feet away. And then he saw the something was a short, black pistol, and that the pistol was flush against Bradley's jaw, and that the pistol was gripped in a soft, round hand that was indubitably Loveman's. And he heard Loverman's voice, no longer velvety, snap out: —

"Damn you, Bradley, — that rough stuff don't go with me! Let loose of him, or, by God, I'll blow your dam' face off!"

Clifford saw Bradley's flaming little eyes shift

toward the speaker. Then he saw the monk-like figure shift the pistol from jaw to Bradley's shoulder.

"No, I'll not kill you; I'll splinter your dam' bones," the sharp voice cried with fierce decision. "Get off that man before I count three, or your left arm'll be the first bone to go. One — two —"

The hands left Clifford's throat, and the heavy figure lifted itself from his body; and, thus freed, Clifford slumped to the floor where he sat limply, pantingly, against the table. Loveman had stepped around the table, and Clifford now saw that he was looking up at Bradley, and he saw that the cherubic, large-eyed face of the lawyer was grim with an awful wrath.

"You dam' big boob!" cried the little man. "You'd let yourself — and me! — in for a criminal charge! And people have always said you have a brain!"

"I've taken all I can from him!" Bradley said thickly.

"Either you control your temper and cut out the rough stuff," snapped Loveman, "or you and I are through!"

The pair gazed fixedly at each other. Neither spoke. While they stood silent, Clifford became aware of the Japanese butler, his back toward the three of them and seemingly unaware of their doings, on his knees picking up bottles and broken glass and toweling up the spilled liquor from the rug.

Without replying, Bradley put his hands in his

trousers' pockets, resumed his chair, and crossed his legs. With an easy motion Loveman dropped the pistol into a pocket of his dressing-gown, and stepped to Clifford's side. He was again the agreeable man-about-town that Broadway liked so well.

"Too bad — but natural — the way men will lose their tempers," he said, as he helped Clifford to his feet and into a chair. "How're you feeling?"

"I'll be all right in a breath or two."

"Better let me give you a brandy?"

"No, thanks."

"Aw, it's nothing!" cut in Bradley. "Let him finish saying how he was going to stop us!"

"Do you feel like that — yet?" Loveman queried solicitously.

Clifford was still dazed, but he was no less set in his purpose. "Bradley's right — a little scuffle like that is nothing."

"Good; a great thing to be in training!" Loveman sank into his chair, smiling urbanely. "We've forgotten what's happened"; and he brushed the matter into oblivion with a pleasant wave of the hand that two minutes before had gripped the pistol. "As I was about to remark — granting that you are right, how are you going to stop it?"

"Of course I could stop it," said Clifford, "by telling Jack and Mr. Morton about Mary Regan and her father and her uncle and her brother. At any rate, that would smash your game."

"As you say, provided, of course, there is a con-

templated marriage, that would stop it," Loveman agreed pleasantly. "Why don't you do that?"

"Considering the character of the Mortons and the fact that she's more worth while than they are, telling on her seems to me a pretty raw deal to give Mary Regan: to show her up to them, and give the father, who's as sympathetic as a shark, a chance to take the lead, break it off, make a scandal out of it, and to humiliate her in public."

"That's dam' delicate of you, Clifford," said Loveman, "and I approve of your sentiments as a gentleman. But if you don't do that, how else are you going to stop it?"

Clifford spoke calmly. "I'm going to stop it through you."

"Through me! Well, well! Do you mind telling me, Clifford, just how I am going to do it?"

"You have some influence over Mary Regan; I don't pretend to know what it is. You go to her to-morrow and you tell her, saying whatever is necessary to bring her around, that she can't go through with the marriage. Then she breaks it off — and not the Mortons, and they'll not be any the wiser about her."

"Well, well, you certainly do seem to think I have a very strong influence with the ladies," Loveman said blandly. "Very flattering, I assure you. But supposing — all we've been talking about is mere supposition, you know — supposing I have a mild disinclination to do what you propose?"

"Supposing that," Clifford returned grimly, "then I go to Mr. Morton, tell him about Mary Regan, and tell him the whole thing was your plan. And he'll believe what I say about you, Loveman; I've merely got to remind him that you suggested Pine Mountain Lodge, prove to him that you knew Mary Regan was there, prove to him that you've been seeing Mary Regan in New York, and he'll swallow everything else. Result, the present scheme of you and Bradley goes smash, and, further, you lose all future business with your best-paying client."

"Supposing, on the other hand," Loveman remarked in his same bland voice, "that I have no disinclination to do what you suggest?"

"In that case, you only lose out on your present plan. I'm not interested in Morton. You keep his business. You see, Loveman, I've got you: and what I'm offering is the best proposition for you."

Loveman gently stroked his crown. "Clifford, do you believe in fairies?"

"Where does that come in?"

"You ought to believe in fairies, Clifford. You really ought. With that imagination of yours, you'd coin money, writing fairy-stories for children — simply coin money." He turned to Bradley. "What do you say to Clifford's proposition?"

"Tell him to go to hell!" said Bradley, his old hatred flaring out.

"You'll excuse Fido's behavior, Clifford," Love-

man said apologetically. "He has n't had a biscuit all day."

"The real question is," returned Clifford, "what does Peter Loveman say to the proposition?"

"What do I say? Well, now, well," Loveman said pleasantly, "you know I never did believe in fairies and so I can't be expected to gulp down this remarkable little story you've told me. But since you are interested in Miss Regan, and are concerned that nothing goes wrong with her — why, for your sake, of course I'll do it — I'll do anything you say."

Clifford stared penetratingly at the round face, which never before looked more like the face of an amiable monk. Behind that amiable face was a swift thought that, after all, he might slip Nina Cordova into this situation and that he'd square matters with Nina the first thing in the morning.

"You'll do it to-morrow?" demanded Clifford.

"To-morrow — sometime before noon." And as Clifford continued his keen glance: "You doubt me? All right." He walked to a section of his bookshelves and came back with a large, dingy volume. "Here's a Bible — a Gutenberg, 1455. There can't be a holier Bible than this; just think, man, what it cost. Go ahead — swear me."

"I guess you'll do it," said Clifford. He rose. "I believe that's all, gentlemen. Good-night."

As he started away Bradley glowered at him; but Loveman, slipping an arm through his, escorted him to the door. There Loveman held him for a moment.

"That was one grand fairy-tale, Clifford, you dreamed about me," he said with a smile through which (perhaps purposely) there glinted ever so little of mockery. "But supposing I do have any little plan under way, I wonder how close you've come to guessing it? Now, I wonder?"

Down in the quiet street, Clifford found himself wondering too.

CHAPTER IX

THE TEST OF LIFE

Now that he had won, now that the marriage and Loveman's plans were potentially blocked, there should have been a let-down from Clifford's long strain. But there was not. The settling of this affair seemed only to give mind-room to other concerns. He tossed about restlessly during the few hours that remained of the night; and he realized that his restlessness was not due wholly to the suspense of waiting for the finality that would come with Loveman's completed promise.

In the slow hours before the coming of the slate-colored dawn a vague, disturbing doubt crept in upon him. He had interfered with events, he had tried to shape life upon his ideas: was his course right? — that seemed to be something of the impalpable substance of his doubt. But what this new doubt was, strive as he would he could not evoke it from its vagueness into definite shape.

He had breakfast; and then, obeying an impulse which seemed to emerge from this new, obscure maze of his mind, he suddenly decided to see Mary Regan again — for what purpose he had no idea. Arrived at the Grantham he had his name 'phoned up to "Mrs. Gardner," and was informed that Mrs. Gardner would see him.

Mary herself admitted him, and, not even replying to his "good-morning," she led him into the sitting-room. There she faced him, proud and coldly defiant.

"I suppose you have come to inform me you have told the Mortons all about me?"

"No," he replied.

"Then, to threaten me again that you will tell?"

"No."

"Then, what have you come for?"

He knew now — at least partly. During the moment he had been in the room and had gazed upon her, there had emerged from the maze of his thoughts and feelings, a sharply defined repugnance to what within the next hour or two was to happen between her and Loveman: a repugnance, felt in her behalf, that she should be made to yield to whatever influences that cunning little lawyer would be able to exert.

"I have come to ask you," he said, trying to speak composedly, but with all his being vibrant beneath that composure, "to break off this affair with Jack Morton of your own free will. You know you don't care for him. You know what you are planning to do is n't square. Why don't you be true to the best self that is in you and end it all yourself? — and end it now? There's the telephone," he urged — remembering that Loveman might any moment appear — "call Jack Morton up and tell him you've decided not to do it!"

As he spoke, her face had grown sharp with decision. "Mr. Clifford," she exclaimed in a low, cutting voice, "I'm tired of your presumption, your interference! I'm tired of your trying to make me be what you think I ought to be! As if it mattered to me what you thought!"

She took a step nearer, her straight, young figure stiffened, and her dark eyes flashed at him. "Understand this, Mr. Clifford, — I've made up my mind, and made it up definitely, finally. I am going to do exactly what I want to do, and it is not in your power to stop me or divert me. You may tell either of the Mortons if you like — my real course will not be changed — that will merely mean that I'll do what I want to do in some other way!"

Clifford did not attempt to answer. Her defiant words, her young figure so rigid with its determined spirit of worldliness, had set some strange force working in him; a vague power seemed to be at conflict with the purpose he had held to for so long; a strange revulsion seized him, a revolution was under way which was compelling in its sweeping drive, but whose intent and direction for a moment he could not perceive.

He stood still, and stared at her. And then out of the inner turmoil came a clear, bright order; and then he realized that the restlessness, the formless doubts of the night before, had been the first faint stirrings of this which was grown and clarified into a new purpose and a new vision — a purpose and vision that

astonished him. For they had come at the very time when his old purpose was the same as achieved.

She could but notice the remarkable change in his appearance. "Well, what is it now?" she demanded.

He drew a deep, quivering breath. A recklessness, a defiance — but behind which his new purpose remained cool — now possessed him. He was aware that he had to act quickly, for any instant Peter Loveman might be here.

"What is it now?" he repeated, with a provoking smile. If he did not have power to stir her to love, he knew that he had the power to stir her to anger. "I was just recalling what you said a moment ago: to the effect that you were going to do what you pleased and do it when you pleased. Pardon me for smiling — but when a woman boasts, it sometimes is amusing and a bit absurd."

"What do you mean?" she said sharply.

"Oh, I'm smiling at myself, too, for I've just realized what a fool I've made of myself in trying to stop you — an entirely unnecessary effort. What I mean, Miss Regan, is that I do not believe you could do it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I suppose you'd go through with your part of it. But if put to the test of marrying at once, Jack Morton would never go through with his part. He may be a bit infatuated; but he's too wise to marry a woman without money — without knowing more about who she is — and without his father's ap-

proval. No wonder Jack has been putting this off!"

She flushed hotly. "I have been the one to put it off!" she cried.

"Indeed," he exclaimed with unbelief none too polite. "From the way he was dancing last night with Miss Cordova — you know, that pretty musical-comedy star — I have an idea she's had a lot to do with the delay. And I imagine she'll have a lot more to do with further delay. Why, you poor thing," — he smiled irritatingly, — "to think you could hold a man like Jack Morton — you having to remain inactive, under cover — he free to roam about with all sorts of charming women — particularly with Miss Cordova!"

She did not speak for a moment. She was choked with that anger on which he had so carefully counted: no person, he knew, would be so likely to act upon impulse as a proud and angered woman, before the man who has insulted her.

"So you think I can't do it!" she exclaimed. "So he's the one who is holding back! Well, I'll just show you! Anyhow, this thing might as well come to a head right now. And I'll give you your chance to tell all you know about me."

She turned and took up the telephone from the writing-desk and asked for the Biltmore. Fortune favored her purpose, for in a minute she had Jack Morton on the wire.

"Can you come right over, Jack, — with your

car? . . . No, don't bring your chauffeur; drive yourself. . . . Why? I'll tell you that when you come—only bring plenty of wraps. . . . All right, I'll be ready; come right up."

"He'll be over in fifteen minutes," she said to Clifford. "You may wait if you like. But you'll excuse me."

She passed into her bedroom. Clifford sank rather limply into a chair. He had come to what just then seemed the supreme crisis of his life, and he was still dazed at the way he had willed that crisis to eventuate. He sat thinking — thinking; the minutes she was out were long minutes to him.

Presently she reëntered. She had changed to a black velvet suit trimmed with black fur; a small fur hat sat snugly down upon her thick, dark hair; and she carried a fur motor-coat. She was an unforgettable picture for him: the high color of her dark face against the background of soft and sheeny blacks.

She did not address Clifford; but there was little time for their silence to become awkward, for almost at once the bell of the suite rang. Mary went to the door, and admitted Jack Morton. The pleasant-faced young fellow looked most comfortably handsome in his great motoring-coat of raccoon.

"I say, Mary, this is certainly fine!" he cried, after he had kissed her. "And, hello — there's Bob Clifford. How's the old boy?" He shook Clifford's hand warmly. "But say, Mary, what's doing?"

Mary looked at Morton when she replied, but her voice was directed at Clifford: "I've decided, Jack, to give in to you. I'm ready to be married at once — to-day."

"Hurrah!" cried young Morton, seizing both her hands. "But we'll have to keep it quiet — same as we planned. You're ready now?"

She did not answer. Clifford noted that her body tautened and her breath was held — as one who waits for a blow; and he understood that she was waiting for, and expecting him to speak the truth about her.

She slowly turned and looked at Clifford. Surprise that he had said nothing was in her face. Then she turned back to Morton.

"I'm all ready," she said distinctly, so that Clifford might not miss a word. "We'll do as you suggested: motor away back into the country to some small place — get married — and a little money spent judiciously there will keep our marriage quiet as long as we like." She turned again to Clifford. "I'm sure we have the best wishes of Mr. Clifford."

He knew that her words, and her straight look, were not now so much challenge or defiance as the bold offering him a second time the chance to speak, and to speak at the most effective moment imaginable. She might be perverse — but of a certainty she had nerve!

"You surely have my wishes that it will all turn

out for the very best," said Clifford; and again he saw surprise in her gaze.

He rode down the elevator with them and walked out to the curb where stood Morton's machine, a black, closed car with a long hood that bespoke the engine-power of a racer. Morton was swinging open the door when Clifford, trying to keep down the choke that sought to rise in his throat, remarked with attempted good-fellowship: —

"If you don't mind, Morton, I wish you'd wire me as soon as it's over. Here at the Grantham."

"Sure, old man. Step in, Mary."

Mary started to obey, then checked herself. "May I speak to you a moment, Mr. Clifford?"

They moved a few paces away. She looked at him penetratingly.

"Why have you done this?" she abruptly whispered.

"Done what?" he parried.

"Don't you think that I see now that you have forced my hand? That I am down here now, about to do this, because you wanted me to do it? Why are you doing it — when you could stop everything, this moment, with just a few words?"

He gave her back a straight look and spoke deliberately. "I have tried for a long time to do with you what I saw as best — to pull the strings — and I have failed, over and over. When you declared a little while ago that I or nothing else could change your purpose, I suddenly had a new vision. I realized

that if you were poor material I could not save you, and that you would not be worth saving. And I realized that if you were good material, only some way that I had not tried could affect you; and it came to me," he went on grimly, "that bitter experience might do for you what I had not done. And it also came to me that if anything could arouse you to the human realities, no experiences might be so effective as what might lie before you in this very marriage you had planned."

"And that is why you said nothing?" she breathed.

He nodded. "I have taken my hands off, to give life its chance to pull the strings."

She gazed at him a moment longer. Then she returned to the car. But as she stepped in, she paused and glanced back once more. Her face was very pale and dazed — it held the look of one who wondered, but could not understand.

Restlessly, but with a heavy heart within him, Clifford wandered about the great lobby of the Grantham. A slow hour passed — then another. Then he saw Peter Loveman, on his plump face an expression which for Loveman was very serious, come up the broad stairway and go straight for the desk at which visitors sent up their names to guests of the house. Loveman spoke to the blonde within the grilled enclosure — waited — then walked away with a sober, puzzled look. He sighted Clifford in a deep lounging-chair, and his face on the instant

grown genial, he crossed and dropped into a chair beside him.

"Need n't explain, Clifford," he said pleasantly, offering a cigarette from a lacquered case which Clifford refused. "Sure, I understand what you showed up here for: to see if I went through with what I promised. Well, I just asked for her, and was told she'd gone out. I'm going to wait for her — and I suppose you'll wait too."

Clifford nodded.

Loveman tried to draw Clifford into conversation, but his light remarks failing to evoke a response, he looked through first the "Wall Street Journal," and then the "Morning Telegraph," that organ of the theater and the other diversions close to Broadway's life. Thus the two sat for over an hour, neither speaking; then a page came by, calling in the impersonal voice of hotel pages, "Telegram Mr. Clifford — Telegram Mr. Clifford."

Clifford took the yellow missive with a hand that he tried to keep from shaking. He was quite certain what was in it — the end of things, just as he had suddenly planned them in his new vision of some three or four hours earlier. Yet, none the less, he had a moment of supreme and sickening suspense as he opened the envelope.

Yes, it was just what he had expected. He gazed fixedly at the typewritten lines before him — lines which were like heavy doors swinging to and locked between him and that of which he had dreamed.

Then he became conscious that the big round eyes of little Peter Loveman were gazing at him curiously. Silently he handed the telegram to the lawyer.

Loveman glanced the telegram through. "The devil!" he cried. Then he read it again, this time aloud: —

Married quiet place ten miles from here. Everybody will keep it secret Happy you bet.

J.

Loveman stared at Clifford. "And it's addressed to you!" he exclaimed. "Say, this means you've crossed yourself! What the devil are you up to?"

Clifford did not answer.

There was a moment of silence, then Loveman whispered to himself: "And I just promised Nina Cordova!"

Again Clifford did not answer; he did not hear Loveman. Such of his senses as were not numbed by the finality of which that telegram was the token were directed into that unfinal future which human vision could not penetrate. How was it all going to work out for Mary Regan? Was experience going to do for her what he had failed to do, or was experience going to stimulate to complete and final dominance her worldliness? And had he played into Peter Loveman's hands? And what would Loveman do?

But these were questions only Life could answer. He had stepped aside to give Life full play, to let human impulses move unhindered by him toward

their destiny; and he must wait until Life was ready to speak.

He was subconsciously aware that Loveman's round eyes were fixed upon him sharply, and he was subconsciously aware that the keen brain behind that round face was working swiftly, ranging in every direction. But without looking at Loveman again, or speaking to him, he rose heavily and went down the broad marble stairway, muted with rugs, out into the winter twilight. These questions that engaged his mind were none of his affair. Mary Regan, as far as she touched his personal life, was now become an episode that was closed. He had other affairs to fill his life; he must turn himself to them.

And yet, as he walked away . . . he wondered . . .

CHAPTER X

THE GOLDEN DOORS

THE hour was eleven-thirty of that same night. Clifford sat in the Gold Room at the Grantham, and kept a careful eye upon the proceedings across the great room at the little corner table known among the waiters as "Mr. Loveman's table."

Clifford watched many persons speak briefly to Loveman. He tried to guess what the shrewd little lawyer might now be up to. Among those who came to Loveman's table he particularly noted a dark, perfectly tailored young man, of perhaps thirty, with the lithe slenderness of the expert dancing male. Clifford knew him by name and reputation, and already he had set him down as one he must watch, together with Loveman and Bradley.

But for all his efforts to concentrate upon his present business, Clifford's mind kept shifting back to Mary Regan. It was a most difficult situation which she had taken upon herself: the daughter of one famous criminal, the niece of another, the sister of another, and herself a former participant in criminal acts — secretly married to a rich young man who knew nothing of her past, and who was dependent upon the approval of an autocratic fa-

ther. To succeed in the soaring worldly plans she had admitted to him with such cold frankness would require marvelous skill, marvelous daring, marvelous self-control. Well — skill, daring, control, she had them!

But there was Loveman to be considered. Clifford asked himself if he had deduced aright Loveman's plans concerning her? Loveman's words, spoken in the early hours of that morning, and spoken with mockery glinting through his habitual amiability of manner, came back to him: "Just supposing I do have any little plan under way, Clifford, I wonder how close you've come to guessing it? Now, I wonder?"

Looking over at the cherubic face of the shrewd little lawyer, Clifford felt for the moment all the doubt that these words had been intended to arouse. Had he, perhaps, guessed only a part of Loveman's plan? — or was he altogether wrong?

And Clifford's restless mind flashed to his last act in the destiny of Mary Regan: the extreme measure he had resorted to in taunting her into that impulsive marriage with Jack Morton; and then his telling her with almost brutal directness, during the brief moment just before she and Jack had motored off, that he had come to realize that only going her own worldly way, only the experience of life, could avail to awaken the real woman that was in her.

He wondered. But only time, as it unrolled its

film of unborn events, could answer these questions. He could now do no more than hope the best results for Mary Regan — wherever she might be.

With an effort Clifford brought himself back to his present business, and again gave sharp attention to that darkly handsome figure of the dancing man. And then — his heart skipped a beat or two. Across the line of his vision, coming from the main entrance of the Gold Room, and convoyed by a suave captain of waiters, walked Mary Regan and Jack Morton. They were ushered to a side table, and at once fell into intimate talk.

Clifford, after his first surprise, watched them closely; and he quickly perceived that, though she smiled and chatted, not more than the surface of Mary's attention was given to her husband of a dozen hours. He tried to look beneath, to what was going on in the hidden deeps of her mind. . . .

That mind was teeming. For her this was a moment of triumph, of exultation. As she had told Clifford, with her cool directness, she had analyzed herself, and had decided that she was a worldling, and, moreover, she knew herself a competent worldling. The things in life that to her were worth while were luxury, admiration, the pleasures that money could buy. She had dreamed this dream — and here was her dream come true!

Her quickened eyes, with a new sense, swiftly took in this great room, decorated in gold and black and with hangings of a kingly blue brocade, and

with smartly dressed people at the tables or swinging in alluring rhythm in the latest dances. After the studied maneuvers, and sometimes necessary seclusion of life with her uncle, all this gayety, and richness, and freedom, warmed the heart of her desire. All this was now hers! — hers whenever she wished it!

It was as if golden doors had swung open. From her subconscious mind these two magic words had emerged to the very forefront of her thought, had become a mental figure of speech which she concretely visualized as a glorious structure which almost existed — Golden Doors! . . .

Clifford, watching that rapt face, hardly noted that Jack had sighted him and was bearing down upon him until Jack seized him by the shoulder and dragged him over to where Mary sat.

"Look who's here, Mary, — almost my bridesmaid!" Jack cried gayly. "Sit down, Clifford," pressing Clifford into a chair and reseating himself. "Now, come across with congratulations!"

Clifford tried to restrain all personal feeling from his tone, and to speak lightly. "I can't do better than to say what's always said — that I hope marriage is going to make a real man out of you."

"Oh, you do! And I suppose" — with joyous acerbity — "that that's what you're wishing for Mary — that it'll make a real woman out of her!"

Clifford still tried to speak easily. "Honestly, now, could one make a better wish for a woman

than that she should never be anybody else but her best self?"

Mary met his gaze steadily. On his side he tried to look, and feel, the part of one who is no more than a casual friend — but, despite his effort at this detached rôle, he could not help guessing at just what was going on behind that calm face.

"You've got a thought on your chest," remarked Jack. "Better cough it up."

"I am merely feeling a bit surprised at seeing you back again."

"Surprised? Why?"

"I imagined you'd stay away for a while."

"I've had enough of the St. Helena life — and so has Mary. New York's the only place!"

"Where are you going to live?"

"Right here at the Grantham. That is, till we like something better."

"Then you are registered here?" pursued Clifford.

"Not I. Mary is, since she's been living here. I was just going to have my things sent over from the Biltmore, and then register with the special hotel pen, which has two ink drops that flow as one."

Clifford was silent for a moment. He had noted that Peter Loveman was watching them from his corner, and that the lithe, dark gentleman he had been closely observing during the evening — his name was Hilton — was now seated at the table adjoining them and was covertly watching Mary.

"Don't register here together," he said abruptly.

"Why not?" exclaimed Jack.

"Would you mind explaining?" Mary asked quietly.

Clifford remembered himself. Only that very morning he had told Mary that he would no longer try to help shape the course of her life — that he would keep his hands off — that hereafter he would let Life pull the strings of her destiny. And here he was interfering again.

"I guess I was n't thinking," he said, trying to be casual. "Anyhow, it's really none of my business."

Mary gazed at him sharply. She surmised that some idea had been behind his remark; but she did not speak. Jack, whose gaze had wandered, gave a start and cried out: —

"Hello, there's dad! And he's spotted us — look, he's coming this way!"

Clifford glanced at Jack's father, an erect man of fifty, with unchallengeable dominance in his manner which the lordship of large affairs had developed from his native self-confidence. Then quickly Clifford glanced back, and managed to comprehend with his gaze both Mary and the dark man at the next table. Mary, grown tense as crisis approached in the form of the elder Morton, said quickly to Jack in a low voice: —

"Introduce me by another name: Gilmore — anything!"

At the same moment Clifford saw her hands be-

neath the table swiftly remove engagement and wedding rings and thrust them into a white glove which lay in her lap. Also he noted that the dark gentleman had caught this action; and he noted that the black eyes glinted with a sudden light.

The next moment he heard Mary being introduced as Miss Gilmore. Clifford watched the meeting keenly.

"I'm very glad to meet Miss Gilmore," the elder Morton said, bowing over her hand and taking her in with a swift, appraising eye. He had a reputation of a sort as a connoisseur of femininity, and what he saw was evidently pleasing to him.

"And I am glad to meet you," Mary returned.

Clifford knew her self-control, but he was freshly amazed at the composed agreeability with which she met her unsuspecting father-in-law.

"Of course, you know Mr. Clifford," Jack went on nervously. "Sit down, dad. We were just finishing a little supper. Can't I order something for you?"

"Nothing for me, son. But I'll sit with Miss Gilmore and you for a minute."

He took a chair, and fixed his gray eyes, trained to penetrate and read what others would hide from him, upon Mary. Clifford tautened with suspense as these two sat face to face. And out of the tail of his eye he saw that the dark man was covertly watching and listening.

"I don't get to New York very often, Miss Gil-

more," Mr. Morton continued, "but this time I'm making it an old man's business and pleasure to try to recapture some of my own youth by getting acquainted with Jack's friends. I suppose he's known you a long time?"

"On the other hand, we first met quite recently."

"If I knew how to be gallant in your Eastern fashion, I might remark that Jack has lost a lot, then. I wonder if you're one of our leading actresses? Jack seems to know so many stage people."

"I'm not even the greatest motion-picture star yet discovered; and you know there are thousands of her. I'm just ordinary woman."

"Not ordinary!" protested Mr. Morton. "I suppose — But, of course, this curiosity of a provincial must be offensive to you?"

"I did not know that a Chicagoan ever admitted himself a provincial."

"Call it the prying curiosity of an old father. That's just as bad."

"A father should be curious," Mary said evenly.

"I was about to say that I suppose you are a native New Yorker?"

"Not in the sense that you probably mean — that I am of an old family here, and have a lot of relations."

"But you are a New Yorker?"

"I was born here. But a large part of my life I spent in France — where," she added, "both my parents died."

"An orphan — and no relations! Perhaps you are one of those independent New York bachelor girls we read about?"

"I live with an aunt. We have an apartment — just a little box of a thing."

"Indeed. Would it be presuming too much on Jack's friendship if I might call upon you and your aunt?"

"Aunt Isabel and I will be pleased to have you," she returned evenly.

"Thank you. If you will find out just when it will be most convenient for her, and let me know through Jack, I'll be there."

Clifford had to admire the composure with which she carried herself through this polite but dangerous inquisition — every instant of which, he saw, was an almost unbearable strain upon the suspense-ridden Jack. But by her invention of an aunt, which had opened the way for a proposal to call, he felt that she might have made a fatal slip. But there was no telling: it looked bad, yes, — but she had a faculty, a gift, for smoothly extricating herself from the worst of situations.

Before this cross-examination could proceed further, little Peter Loveman appeared at the table. Clifford instantly surmised the shrewd little lawyer's motive: he had witnessed the scene, and, knowing its dangers to himself, sought to intervene before there could be exposure and explosion.

"Pardon me for breaking in on your party, Mr.

Morton," he said, with his glib amiability. "But some facts just came to my knowledge which, as your lawyer, I feel you ought to know at once."

"All right; I was just leaving, anyhow. Jack, I've been wanting to see you all day — it's really very important. I wonder if Miss Gilmore would forgive you, and us, if we left her with Mr. Clifford?"

It had been a scene that had almost crumpled Jack. Mary saved the situation for him by speaking promptly but with composure.

"It will be quite all right, Mr. Morton."

"To pay the check with," Jack mumbled huskily, pushing a bank-note beside Clifford's plate.

The next moment Clifford and Mary were alone. She gazed across at him very steadily, not speaking. Her breath came with a slight, fluttering irregularity, and her face had taken on a slight pallor; he could guess how much the stress of the last few minutes had taxed her. She glanced about the tables for a brief space, then her eyes came back to him.

"I'd like to go up to my apartment," she said quietly.

Clifford paid the bill and escorted her out of the great, glittering room. Near the row of elevators she halted and faced him.

"What was in your mind a while ago when you started to tell Jack and me not to register here together?"

He tried to speak coldly. "Please overlook that.

I forgot for the moment that I had promised you I would not again interfere in your affairs."

"Please tell me what was in your mind," she quietly insisted.

"First of all, I was surprised that you and Jack should return to New York — so soon."

"Why?"

"Something similar to what has just happened was bound to happen if you appeared in New York openly together — only it might have been a great deal worse. And that worse thing would inevitably have happened if you two had registered. I thought you would have considered this danger."

"I had thought of it, yes, — that is, before to-day. But to-day so much was happening to me — it was all so sudden — that all day I was thinking of other things."

He looked at her sharply, a sudden leaping at his heart. Was he in any way concerned in those other things? But he put the question from him.

Abruptly he obeyed an impulse that had been growing in him. "May I break my promise to the extent of telling you of a few matters?"

"Please do."

"You have chosen your own way," he said, in even tones, looking very straight into her dark eyes, "but — well, after all, I want you to make the best of it for yourself. These few facts — perhaps you know them already — may help you. First, and I say this without any personal prejudice to Jack,

Jack has the reputation of caring for many women often rather than for one woman long. Second, largely for business reasons, Mr. Morton desires to have Jack marry a girl from Chicago. Third, this girl's parents will not consider such a marriage until Jack has proved that he has settled down; therefore, it naturally is Mr. Morton's dominating desire at present that Jack should become a steady business man. He'd like to have Jack enter the New York offices of his firm. That is all. If you think these matters over, perhaps you will see a way in which they may serve you."

"Perhaps I shall. Thank you." She moved to the elevators, and stood silent until a car opened. "Good-night," she said, and stepped inside.

"Good-night," he returned.

He stood an instant after her car had shot upward. She had chosen her own course. And this was only the beginning of the consequences. What might the ending be?

CHAPTER XI

MARY PLANS ANEW

THE following morning Clifford called at the Grantham and asked if Mrs. Morton was in.

The clerk examined the hotel's file of guests. "There is no Mrs. Morton staying here."

So, after all, they had not registered. He recalled that Mary had formerly been known here as Mrs. Gardner.

"May I see Mrs. Gardner, then?" he asked.

"Mrs. Gardner moved from the Grantham early this morning," replied the clerk. "I'd just come on duty when she left."

"Was there a — was her brother with her?"

"She was alone."

"If you will kindly give me her new address—"

"She left no address."

Clifford walked out of the Grantham in deep thought. Mary had realized her situation, she had acted promptly. But what was her plan? — for undoubtedly she had evolved a plan during the night. And where had she gone?

And how was it all going to work out? To be sure, the penetration of the designs of Loveman and Bradley was his real business; but he could not help himself, he was vastly more interested in

what Mary might be doing, and in what was to be the end of it all for her. He called on Slant-Face; but her brother still had not seen or heard from her directly since her return to New York. He kept Loveman under surveillance, and also Bradley; the maneuvers of either might lead him to her. And also he kept watch upon Hilton, whose eyes had suddenly lighted when he had seen Mary quickly thrust her rings into her gloves. But he picked up nothing.

Clifford might have been greatly helped in his search for Mary by Commissioner Thorne: a general alarm might quickly have located her. But he did not want Mary brought before the general attention of the police. However questionable the ethics of the course her ambition had planned, there was in it nothing that was legally criminal.

For a week he kept close surveillance upon Loveman, Bradley, and the dark young man; and learned not a thing about Mary and not a thing about the plans of the others. Then one day he ran across the elder Morton, who had just returned to the city after a trip to Chicago.

"You won't believe it when I tell you," said the older man, "but Jack's gone to work."

"Where?"

"In my New York offices. Been working there a week — and they tell me he's been as regular as a clock. Remarkable change!" His voice lowered. "But here's a point that seems odd: though he's

kept his rooms at the Biltmore, the people there have hardly seen him."

The finding of Mary now seemed simple enough. But Clifford realized that mere knowledge of her whereabouts would not satisfy him. Clifford considered rapidly how he might achieve a private meeting with her. Half an hour later he was sitting with Uncle George in Monsieur Le Bain's Grand Alcazar, and was telling this wise old man of Broadway all that had happened.

"Certainly some little situation for Mary Regan!" Uncle George looked at Clifford with his shrewd old lashless eyes. "But, son, I hope your motor's not missing fire over her — and her a married woman?"

"I'm concerned because I'm certain Loveman is planning to use her. I can protect her better, and I stand a better chance to land Loveman, if I know where she is."

"H'm. And is that the three-mile limit of your interest?"

"I'm human enough to want to know what she's done and how she's planned to meet the future. Knowing that will help me against Loveman."

"Well, son, be sure you're not passing phony money off on yourself — which is what the average citizen does when he thinks he has one of these here righteous thoughts. I suppose you've got me fitted into some nice little idea?"

"You're going to help me meet her."

"Oh, that's all, is it!" the old man said dryly. "All I've got to do is to step out on Broadway, touch her on the sleeve, and say, 'Good-afternoon, Mary; Bob Clifford wants to one-step with you to a bit of nice chin-music' — and in she'll come wearing a smile on all four sides, you being so popular with her!"

"All you've got to do, Uncle George, is something else. Jack likes you; Mary considers you one of her best friends. You go into that telephone booth, call up Jack at his father's office, and learn where she is — and after you've learned that we'll dope out the rest."

"I did n't think that in my old age I'd sink to be a stool for a copper," sighed Uncle George, with mock mournfulness.

He heaved his big body up and crossed to a booth. Five minutes later he swayed back to Clifford's side.

"I got a line on her. But it's up to me to do some of this here super-delicate detective work. Sit where you are — though it's an awful risk to leave you alone and unprotected right over a wine cellar. I may be back in an hour. So-long."

He was back in half an hour. "She's having tea over at the Ritz. Come on. I got a taxi waiting outside."

He led the way out and across the sidewalk, bulking large before Clifford. "May God pity an old sinner for what'll be comin' to him for this!" he

murmured. At the door of the taxi he stepped aside. "Get in first," he said to Clifford; and, as Clifford obeyed, he smartly closed the door on Clifford's back. "All right," he called to the chauffeur.

As the taxi moved away, a startled voice within the car exclaimed: "You!"

Clifford then saw that he was sitting beside Mary. "Miss Regan!" he ejaculated, forgetting her new name.

"Uncle George told me we were to pick up Jack."

"I hope you'll forgive the deception. Don't blame Uncle George. Blame me."

"What does this mean?" she demanded.

"I felt I had to see you at once."

"Why?"

"You see, I could hardly help wanting to know what you had done."

He had thought it more than likely that she would be angry. Her dark eyes did flash at him; but when she spoke she spoke very calmly.

"There's no reason why you should not know; and I have no objections to telling you everything. What do you wish to know first?"

"What you did first."

She considered, then spoke with a cold frankness that was in keeping with her recent attitude toward him — to show him her calculating worldliness, stark, unexcused.

"I thought I had passed through the Golden

Doors, — that's a phrase of mine, — but after that night at the Grantham when I saw you, I realized that I still stood far without them. I saw that I had either to vanish — or be willing to wait my time, perhaps a long time, if I would see it through. I decided on the latter."

"Yes," Clifford prompted.

"That meant," the unsparing voice went on, "that for a long time Jack and I would hardly dare be seen openly together, that we had to live in seclusion. I made Jack see things as I saw them, so we sublet an apartment on Riverside Drive, and we're known there as Mr. and Mrs. Grayson."

"And what about Jack's going to work?"

"I thought that if through my influence Jack should settle down, it would help when his father finds out."

"I see."

"I realize perfectly," the cold voice continued, "another problem that I have to face. Jack likes gay company; further, you said it is not his nature to care for one woman long. Well, I must make Jack like me for a long time, and make him like me despite the solitude. I shall do it." She paused, then added: "I believe that is everything."

They rode on in silence, Clifford covertly eyeing the erect, contained figure beside him — guessing at what it must have cost her to give up her dreamed-of pleasure, to be forced into seclusion, to be forced to undertake the responsibility of sobering down a

joyous spendthrift. Life certainly had not given her what she had expected in her bargain.

Again the question rose: how was it all coming out?

The next afternoon Clifford, following Hilton, saw his quarry enter the Mordona, the great apartment house on the Drive before which he had left Mary the night before. He followed into the lobby just as his man disappeared into an elevator. He had no doubt on whom the dark gentleman was calling, or for what reason he called.

Opening into the elaborate lobby, for whose gilded ostentation the tenants were assessed a goodly portion of their rent, was a florist's shop. Into the comparative privacy of this Clifford stepped to wait until his man came down: a move that was just in time, for from a descended elevator, which must have passed the one bearing Hilton aloft, stepped the square, solid figure of Bradley. Again Clifford had no doubt on whom the call had been made, or why.

At last he had picked up a warm and very busy trail. Under pretense of an indecision over the flowers he should purchase, he waited for his man to come down, trying to reproduce the scene that was now going on in the "Graysons'" apartment, and the scene prior to it in which Bradley had figured. A quarter of an hour passed, then the debonair Hilton emerged from an elevator and strode out with a jaunty, smiling air.

The next moment Clifford was in an elevator, shooting upward, and two minutes later Mary's maid was bearing his card through a curtained doorway. He caught Mary's voice sounding as though it were two rooms away, finishing what was obviously a telephone conversation: "You'll come as soon as you can get here? That's most kind of you. Good-bye."

There was a delay; he guessed that Mary was surprised at this third successive call; then he was shown through the curtained doorway into the drawing-room. His swift impression of the room was that it was large for a New York apartment, and that its prodigal furnishings bespoke wealth rather than taste on the part of its absent lessee. The next moment Mary came in through a door which he judged led from the library. There was now in her bearing nothing of the cold frankness which she had shown him the day before. She was taut with controlled excitement, which he knew to be the product of the so recent interviews. Her manner was challenging.

"What do *you* want?"

He tried to speak in a steady, impersonal tone. "Mr. Bradley was here a few minutes ago. I'd be obliged if you'd tell me what he came for."

"Pardon me for not obliging you — but that is my own affair. Is this all?"

"Another gentleman just called on you. Would you tell me what he wanted?"

"That also is my own affair."

"It might help me greatly if I knew exactly what he asked for," Clifford urged.

"Perhaps. But that cannot concern me."

"Then you will not tell?"

"No."

"Are you aware who this man is?"

"He's a friend of Jack's."

"Not much of a friend, I hope." Clifford still spoke in his steady, impersonal tone. "Mr. Hilton is one of several men that I am after — and he's one of the cleverest and most dangerous of the lot. It is the easiest thing in the world for a crook who is well-dressed, well-mannered, and who can dance, to make acquaintances wherever he likes. The regular game of these crooks is to pick out a woman with money, or who can get money, make her acquaintance, gain her confidence and some of her secrets, and then lead her into a situation where she must pay or be exposed. This is your last visitor's special line. You might help me a lot if you would tell me what Mr. Hilton wanted from you."

"He came to see me about a personal matter of no importance," she replied.

"Pardon me if I do not believe you," he said.

She made no response.

"You will not tell?" he demanded.

"I have nothing to tell," was her steady answer.

"I might force you to tell —" he snapped at her, but instantly cut himself off.

"Since you won't tell me," he said, stepping more

squarely before her, "then I'll tell you. Bradley came here to blackmail you; blackmail is one of Bradley's big side-lines just now. Hilton was a follow-up man on the same business. If he was n't in this particular game before, he got next the other night at the Grantham. He saw you slip off your rings and hide them when Jack's father was coming to your table. He guessed what that action meant, and it was easy for him to dig up the rest."

Clifford paused. "I'm right so far, yes?" he demanded.

But she did not speak.

"And I can tell you just what he said," Clifford continued, "and how he said it — for he's a most gentle-spoken party. It would cause him very great regret to have to tell Mr. Morton that his son had contracted a secret marriage, and it would cause him even greater regret to have to tell both the Mortons just who Mary Regan has been and just who are the members of her family. The only way he can be saved from inflicting upon himself this regret is for you to come across with a large sum of money. Well, is n't that about it? Now will you help me out?"

"I can say no more than I have said," she replied.

"Then I shall have to get him alone," Clifford said, with grim quiet. "Him and the others."

He left her with no further word. On the way down in the elevator he recalled the fragment he had heard over the telephone; and again he stepped

into the convenient privacy of the florist's shop. Not more than two minutes had passed when he saw Peter Loveman enter one of the elevators. So it was Loveman she had been telephoning to. She had doubtless sent for the little lawyer to ask his advice — the irony of it!

Clifford waited for Loveman to descend. Fifteen minutes passed — it was now getting on toward six; then into the lobby, walking eagerly, came Jack Morton. And then in the entrance, watching but discreetly unobtrusive, appeared Jack's father. Jack's elevator had made its trip up and had just descended, when the elder Morton crossed the lobby and addressed the elevator-man. The florist's door stood open, so Clifford heard every word.

"By the way," said Mr. Morton, "what is the name of the gentleman, your only passenger, that you just took up? I thought I recognized him as an acquaintance."

"Mr. Grayson, sir."

"He lives here?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose he has one of your bachelor apartments?"

"No, sir. He lives here with Mrs. Grayson."

"To be sure. I did n't know Mrs. Grayson's health had permitted her to come back from California. Please don't mention my having been here; they might feel hurt at my not having come up."

He slipped the man a bill and went out. Clifford

realized that Mr. Morton had been engaged upon a bit of private sleuthing on his own account: which might lead to — what?

Clifford thought a moment. Then he sought out the superintendent of the building, and after some very confidential talk, and a showing of credentials, which the superintendent verified by calling up Police Headquarters, he departed, bearing with him a pass-key to all the apartments of the Mordona.

CHAPTER XII

A GENTLEMAN OF PLEASURE

THERE were at least four persons that Clifford knew it was desirable to keep under surveillance — Bradley, Peter Loveman, Mr. Morton, and Hilton; but the professional ladies' man he regarded as the best clue to the immediate situation. "Yes, you stick to Hilton," Uncle George agreed decisively that evening at dinner. "When it comes to twisting women, that dear limber guy is a better committee on ways and means than any charmer that ever adorned himself in a smile, pumps, and a dress suit."

That night Clifford trailed Hilton from restaurant to theater, and then to three of the smartest hotel ballrooms, and then, toward three in the morning, saw him to his hotel. He picked Hilton up at noon the next morning; lunched (it was Hilton's breakfast) at a table near him at the Ritz Carlton; followed him to a few restaurants where afternoon dancing was under way; and at exactly half-past five he followed him into the Mordona.

He gave Hilton a minute's start, then rode up to the "Graysons'" apartment. Hilton had evidently been admitted, for the corridor was empty. Muffling the lock with a handkerchief, Clifford slipped

in the pass-key, and swiftly, but with velvet caution, he opened the door. Inside, he closed the door with as great care, and stood, unbreathing, listening kitchenward for the maid — fingers on lips and a bill held out to check immediately any words should that young lady appear: a needless stratagem, since Mary had given her maid that afternoon out. Hearing nothing, he moved softly to the curtained doorway of the drawing-room, and glanced in. Apparently Mary had planned to go out to an early dinner, for she wore an evening gown. She was standing erect in the middle of the room, gazing with level eyes at the immaculate Mr. Hilton.

"I am here at five-thirty, as I said I'd be," Hilton was saying, smiling pleasantly. "I hope you have seen the wisdom of my remarks and have reconsidered your defiant attitude of yesterday. You undoubtedly have a very good plan, and it would be most unfortunate" — his voice was soothingly argumentative — "if you compelled me to tell Mr. Morton about the marriage, and tell them both who your relatives are, and just who is Mary Regan. Most unfortunate, I assure you."

"You need not squander your emotion. I have the money."

"I approve your good sense! You have the full amount?"

"You may count it for yourself." She held out a little roll.

"Ten five-hundred-dollar bills. Correct. Though

it pinches me that you could not make it the ten thousand I asked for. However! I suppose" — in high good humor — "you'd like a receipt for this. It might help you in court if you ever decided to bring action against me."

"Your jocularity is not greatly appreciated. Now that you have the money, I suggest that you go."

"As pleases you." Drawing back the lapel of his slender afternoon coat — it had been a warm afternoon, and he had worn no outer coat — he slipped the bank-notes into the top pocket of his vest. "In leaving you, Mrs. — ah — Grayson, let me wish your little enterprise the most complete success. Good-afternoon."

Clifford was on the point of springing into the room, when, to his amazement, from the door which opened into the library, there emerged the plump figure of Peter Loveman. On the face of the shrewd little lawyer was a bewildered, almost sickly look, the like of which Clifford had never beheld on that usually amiable and ruddy countenance.

"Just a minute!" said Loveman.

Hilton whirled about. "Oh, it's Loveman! Hello, Loveman."

Loveman crossed toward the other. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Just making a little afternoon call. Will you return the courtesy and tell me how you come to be here?"

"I was here when you came, and was waiting

until you had gone to finish my talk with Mrs. Grayson." Clifford could see that the control which had slipped away from Loveman was regained, for the little man was benign again — therefore, dangerous. "Are you sure, Hilton," he said softly, "that your purpose here was only to call?"

"Merely social, Loveman," the other replied, smiling.

"I think, Hilton," continued Loveman, in his soft, pleasant tone, "that anything you got here you'd better return to Mrs. Grayson."

"I have nothing to return."

"I think you'll find it wiser and more profitable in the end to return it," went on Loveman's pleasant voice.

"I have nothing to return," repeated the other, drawing on his gloves.

The two men gazed at each other steadily. Clifford could see that beneath Hilton's smiling politeness there was defiance, that beneath Loveman's soft manner there was menace. He was puzzled by this hostility, for he had figured that the pair, with Bradley, were working together. But he instantly perceived why this hostility should be masked; the two spoke thus indirectly because neither, or at least not Loveman, wished Mary to understand what lay between them. And Mary did not understand; the bewildered look she gave the pair told Clifford that.

Hilton ended the brief tableau by picking up his

hat and stick, which he had carried into the room with him. "Good-afternoon, Mrs. Grayson; this has been a most pleasant occasion. So-long, Loveman."

He was turning away when Clifford sprang through the doorway and upon him. Clifford seized his right wrist and swung the arm upward and backward with a vicious twist — an old police trick — and thrust a hand through the flaring front of the exquisitely tailored coat and possessed himself of the bank-notes. Hilton's stick and hat went flying; he let out a cry of surprise and pain; but before he knew what had happened to him there had snapped about his wrists a pair of handcuffs.

Clifford jerked him forward, so that their faces were within a foot of each other. "Well, Hilton, this time I've got you with the goods on!" he snapped. "This will be the last woman you'll squeeze money out of for about five years!"

"See here, I've done nothing," gasped the breathless Hilton. "That's my own money — I had it when I came here."

Clifford turned to Mary. "I warned you what he was — one of the cleverest of that new trade whose specialty is squeezing big money out of women!"

"He's done nothing," Mary affirmed, looking directly at Clifford. "You — how did you get in here? I heard no ring."

"Pass-key. That story does n't go, Mrs. Grayson — it does n't go, Hilton. I was right on Hilton's

heels when he entered. I heard him demand the money on threat of exposure. I saw the money passed."

He turned abruptly on Loveman. "And you, Loveman, you fit into this pretty little game, too!"

"Me, Bob, my dear boy?" protested Loveman. "Why is it," he demanded, in a tone of mourning, "that the innocent bystander is the one that always gets the copper's stick over his new spring derby?"

"Your suspicions against Mr. Loveman —" began Mary.

"Don't say a word, Mrs. Grayson," Loveman cut in quickly.

"Your suspicions against Mr. Loveman are mistaken," persisted Mary. "Mr. Loveman gave me that money."

"Gave you the money!" exclaimed Clifford.

"Mrs. Grayson!" appealed Loveman.

But Mary went on, speaking very steadily and with a formal precision. "You are right about Mr. Hilton. He came yesterday afternoon, demanding money which had to be paid by half-past five to-day. I at first refused; afterwards I recognized I did n't dare not pay. I did not know where to get such a sum, so I telephoned Mr. Loveman that I wished to see him. He came at once, and I told him of my situation and that I could not possibly raise the amount upon such short notice. Jack did not have the money, and I could not have asked him for the amount, anyhow; and my uncle is away

out on the coast. I asked Mr. Loveman's advice. He saw my predicament, and himself offered to give me the money. Half an hour ago he came, bringing the money which you have. I believe that completely exonerates Mr. Loveman."

"Yes, Bob," Loveman said cheerfully, "I guess that lets me out."

Clifford looked keenly at the little man's round, good-natured face — behind which played an unmatched shrewdness. Clifford did not disbelieve Mary, yet it seemed to him out of the man's character to play such a rôle as Mary had described. This was one more aspect of the whole situation which for the moment bewildered him.

"I think, Peter, we'll soon figure out just where you fit into this case," he said shortly. He turned to his prisoner. "At any rate, I've got you for fair, Hilton," he said grimly. "Loveman, kindly oblige Mr. Hilton by picking up his stick and hat."

"You may have me all right," said Hilton, with a pale, twitching smile that he tried to force to be jauntily indifferent, "but when the evidence against me is produced in court what will happen to Mrs. Mary Regan Morton Grayson?"

"Oh, I say, Bob," Loveman spoke up quickly, "call it square if he gives the money back to —"

But his words were cut off by the ringing of the apartment bell. They all suddenly became as fixed as so many statues. Then Mary spoke, and her words came rapidly: —

"It must be Jack, home from the office. He's probably forgotten his key. Mr. Loveman, you go to the door and prevent his coming in. Say whatever you like."

Loveman slipped through the curtained doorway, and the next moment Clifford heard the outer door open. Then he heard an amazed voice exclaim: —

"Well, if it's not Loveman! Now what the devil are you doing here?"

Clifford and Mary both started. The amazed voice in the next room was not Jack's voice.

"I'm here — on a little business — with Mrs. Grayson," stammered Loveman.

"So am I," said the voice.

"But she's engaged — I assure you —"

"I'll only take a minute or two. Come on; you shall introduce me. Don't hang back."

The next moment Loveman was pushed through the door, and behind him appeared the tall figure of Mr. Morton, evening clothes showing beneath his overcoat. He stopped short at what he saw.

"Why, Mr. Clifford!" he exclaimed. And then: "Why, I beg your pardon, Miss Gilmore! Or should I say Mrs. Grayson?"

Clifford saw that Mary had gone almost white. He sensed, and he knew that she sensed, that one of the supreme crises of her new life — the life that was to make her or break her — was unexpectedly before them.

Mary spoke calmly. "It is Mrs. Grayson now."

"How rapidly events do happen in New York," Mr. Morton remarked politely, his keen gray eyes full upon her. "Miss Gilmore when I saw you at the Grantham — Mrs. Grayson within a week. He must be a young Lochinvar, Mr. Grayson, the way he does things."

Hilton had been standing beyond Clifford, blocked out of Mr. Morton's first swift survey of the scene. He now shifted forward, and Mr. Morton saw him, the grip of Clifford fastened on his upper arm, and the glinting handcuffs on his wrists.

"What's this all about?" Mr. Morton exclaimed.

Hilton was swift to see what advantage for him lay in the situation. He stepped nearer Mr. Morton.

"It means that I am the victim of a most unfortunate misunderstanding," he spoke up quickly. "Mr. Clifford believed, mistakenly, that I had come wrongfully by some five thousand dollars in my possession, and he took the money from me and placed me under arrest."

"It's none of my business, I suppose," Mr. Morton said, "but is this correct, Mr. Clifford?"

Clifford remained silent for a moment. In a flash he saw that for him to answer with the full truth would lead to Mary's instant ruin: this after he had declared that he had stepped out of her life, that he was going to leave to experience and her own decisions the shaping of her fate.

"The last part of his statement is correct," replied

Clifford — "that I took the money from him and placed him under arrest."

"But he declares the money is his. If not, whose is it?"

In the passing moment Clifford had decided to put it squarely up to Mary, to thrust the tangled threads of her destiny into her own hands. But Hilton beat him to the very reply he intended making.

"Ask Mrs. Grayson whose money it is," cried Hilton, and, wheeling, he gave Mary a meaning look.

But Mr. Morton's eyes waited on Clifford. Clifford turned and gazed at Mary.

"Yes, ask Mrs. Grayson," said Clifford.

"Mrs. Grayson," said Mr. Morton, "the ownership of this disputed money seems to rest on your word."

She hesitated. Clifford read beneath that white, calm face: realized that she was on the thinnest of thin ice — if indeed she were not already through it and in the black waters. He believed, and was certain she believed, that Mr. Morton already knew of the marriage — but did he know of the other things?

"Whose is it, Mrs. Grayson?" prompted Mr. Morton.

She indicated Hilton with a nod. "The money is his; give it to him, Mr. Clifford," she said.

Clifford quickly weighed his conflicting responsibilities. To give Life the chance to test Mary out

to the end of this experience weighed more important than the mere capture of Hilton.

"Here it is," he said; and thrust the bills into one of the handcuffed hands — and as he did so, out of the tail of his eye he caught a look of dismay on Loveman's face.

"Since your affairs seem to be adjusted," put in Mr. Morton, "I dare say you'd like to be saying good-afternoon."

Clifford removed the handcuffs, Loveman gave Hilton his hat and cane, and the professional entangler of women, though ruffled somewhat as to the perfection of his apparel, bowed himself out with exquisite manner.

There was a moment of silence — a strain upon all except Mr. Morton, who had the light, easy bearing of a man of the world at an afternoon tea. If he knew or guessed anything, he did not show it — and his pleasant surface made him seem all the more dangerous.

He gave Mary a slight but gracious bow. "I hope you'll forgive my dropping in so informally. But I had learned your address by chance, I happened to be in the neighborhood, and I wished to advance my acquaintance, begun when you were Miss Gilmore."

"I'm sure I'm glad you called," returned Mary.

"Then we'll have a little visit — yes?" He slipped off his overcoat. "Mr. Clifford, I know Mrs. Grayson would be glad to have you remain as our

chaperone. Mr. Loveman" — with the faintest of ironic smiles — "I know I would not have a ghost of a chance with such a famous lady's man in the company, so I am going to have the audacity to ask you to call again."

He had spoken with lightness, but there had been autocratic demand behind his words. Loveman disappeared into the room whence Clifford had seen him emerge, and returned with hat and coat. He tried to speak an offhand good-bye — though Clifford read that his soul was agitated with acute uneasiness — and started out.

"I'll be back in a moment," Clifford said to the two, and followed the little lawyer. He caught him in the hallway and held him with a hand on either shoulder.

"Loveman," said he, looking down into the round face, "I certainly was up in the air for a time. But I've sized up the whole situation now."

"What situation?"

"The situation between you, Miss Regan, — Mrs. Morton, I mean, — and Hilton. I thought that, of course, you, Bradley, and Hilton were in the game together."

"Well?"

"I thought there was just one scheme on foot to blackmail Mrs. Morton. I've just tumbled to the fact that there were two schemes — and that there's just been a head-on collision between the two."

"Bob, my boy, please elucidate."

"Further, Loveman, I understand your generosity in the matter of that five thousand. Bradley had demanded money, and you knew it. When Mary Regan sent for you yesterday, told you of the demand, and convinced you she could not possibly meet it, you had an inspiration. It would n't do to withdraw the demand; better to give her the money yourself, and thereby increase her confidence and gratitude — that'd make her more inclined to fall in with you when you wanted to use her in some other big game. And your five thousand which you'd given her with your right hand, after she'd had it for just a few minutes, would come right back to your left hand. A great idea, Loveman! — great stuff!"

"You're smoking too much hop," smiled Loveman — but it was a sickly smile.

"But there's many a slip 'twixt the right hand and the left. You never suspected that there was a second blackmailer on the job; Mrs. Morton probably thought that Bradley and Hilton were working together, and told you little more than that money was demanded. And Hilton has walked right off with your five thousand, and you'll not get it back. And your client in there, Mr. Morton, is on to Jack and Mary Regan, and the part you've played, and there's about to be an explosion, and the rest of your beans'll be spilled. Good-night, Peter, old boy, and may you have pleasant dreams!"

CHAPTER XIII

MR. MORTON TAKES A HAND

ALL thought of the sickly-smiling Loveman, and all his ironic jocularity, slipped from Clifford as he stepped back into the graver situation which existed in the drawing-room. The pair had seated themselves during his absence; Mary was regarding Mr. Morton with a composure that must have heavily taxed her nervous capital.

Clifford took a chair slightly apart. He felt that he had become merely an onlooker. The scene was to be played out between Mr. Morton and Mary. He judged that the easy manner of Mr. Morton was a ruthless fury, marvelously controlled. Watching them, he pulsed with suspense as to how Mary would bear herself during this scene, as to how it would come out.

Clifford had found them silent when he had re-entered, and this silence, pregnant with big drama, continued for a moment longer. Then Mr. Morton smiled.

"I don't believe in beating about the bush, Mrs. Grayson. It's awfully hard on the shrubbery. So I'll come to the point. Of course you know why I'm here."

"You said you came to renew your acquaintance with Miss Gilmore," she managed to say.

"Oh, that, of course. But there's another reason. You see" — with his pleasant smile — "I happen to know Mr. Grayson."

(Why in God's name, Clifford asked himself, did n't the man set loose the anger and denunciation and defiance customary in such situations, and not play this cat-and-mouse game!)

"And Mr. Grayson being such a good friend," Mr. Morton continued, "in fact, a most intimate friend, I naturally was most eager to become acquainted with Mrs. Grayson. Please do not consider that I am descending to mere flattery, Mrs. Grayson, when I say that I applaud his taste."

"Thank you."

"I do not mean to depreciate him, but he has shown a finer discrimination than I thought Mr. Grayson capable of."

Clifford saw Mary stiffen. He knew her instinct to rush forth to meet an inevitable danger.

"I also do not believe in beating about the bush," she said quietly. "We both are aware that in speaking of Mr. Grayson we are speaking of your son."

The veiled keenness in Mr. Morton's eyes became open. "I perceive, Mrs. Grayson, that you are not only beautiful, but that you are an unusual woman." He did not speak for a moment; then, "Let me add that I not only applaud Jack's taste, but approve his choice."

Both Clifford and Mary started. "You approve Jack's choice!" she breathed.

"How could I help it?" he returned.

Clifford and Mary could only stare at him. They had expected outraged fury — and this had come! They were so dazed that they did not know Jack had entered until he stammered: —

"Father — you here!"

"The evidence indicates such, my boy," returned the elder Morton.

"Why — why —" He looked about, frightened, helpless, at the three; and then stammered on: "I went to the Biltmore to meet you, as you telephoned; but they told me you were out, and I thought I'd run up here for a minute and then get back —"

"My engagement with you," interrupted Mr. Morton, "was merely a fatherly subterfuge to keep you away from here while I had a little visit with Mrs. Grayson."

"Then" — he choked, swallowed — "then you know everything?"

"Not everything. But I know the essentials."

"Oh, my God!" And Jack collapsed almost bonelessly into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Come, brace up — there's nothing to worry about," half growled Clifford.

"It's all right, Jack," explained Mary. "Your father says he approves your choice!"

Jack was on his feet as though an electric current had hurled him upright. "Is that so, dad?"

Mr. Morton nodded.

In two eager steps Jack was across the room wringing his father's hand. "You don't know how relieved I am!"

"Why should you think I'd object after really meeting Mrs. Grayson?"

"Call her Mary, dad."

"Mary, then, with your permission. Plainly Mary is a young woman of exceptional sense, and I am sure she and I will understand each other splendidly."

Jack crossed swiftly to Mary. "Mary!" he exclaimed, seizing her hands, "Mary!" And then in a lower voice, though Clifford heard him: "It's all coming true, Mary, — it's all coming true!"

The Golden Doors had marvelously swung open!

Mr. Morton was speaking again: "Let's get back to sensible talk — which is what I came here for. I wish to commend your discretion in this matter. Boys will be boys, but usually they're boys in such a noisy way. I'm sure the discretion was yours, Mary."

"Discretion? I don't know what you mean," said Mary.

"I mean that you have done everything so well," he continued pleasantly. "You've not laid the affair open to instant recognition by thoughtlessly flaunting yourself about with Jack. You've even taken the precaution of wearing the conventional rings. It's the Riverside Drive affair done in the best Riverside-Drive-affair manner."

Clifford saw Mary go white again, and whiter than before, as Mr. Morton spoke; and he thought she was going to fall as she gathered the meaning of his words — gathered what, since he had first entered, had been his real conception of the relationship.

"But, dad —" began Jack in a throaty voice. "You don't know what you're saying! You don't understand. The truth is —"

"Jack!" cut in Mary.

"Oh, yes, I do understand," his father assured him. "And don't try to shield Mary with protestations. She does n't need such flimsy protection."

"Dad," demanded the young fellow huskily, "what do you think this situation is?"

"The obvious and usual one: you're living here together; as they always say it on the stage, she's your mistress."

He turned to Mary. "Jack's a sentimentalist. But you're a sensible woman and don't humbug yourself by hesitating to call a thing by its right name."

His last words were an even-toned affirmation of a commonplace, not a question. Clifford watched Mary closely: of a certainty, Life was testing her! He waited tensely for her reply, and so did Jack — and Clifford realized what vague worlds of different events hung upon the words yet within her lips.

"I am Jack's mistress — yes," she said, looking very straight into Mr. Morton's eyes.

"Mary, that's —"

"Jack!" she ordered sharply.

"There's no nonsense about you, Mary," said Mr. Morton approvingly. "Jack has braced up so much recently —"

"If I have braced up, it's been because Mary has made me!" put in Jack.

"I don't doubt it, and I want to thank you, Mary. He's braced up so much that a long-contemplated marriage, which has been delayed by his irresponsibility, can now go through; and I want it settled and over with, quick, while Jack is still in a reformed mood — before he breaks loose again. I know you'll be sensible and reasonable about this matter, for I know you went into the affair knowing it could not last."

Jack seized his father's arm. "Father, you've got to listen —"

"Jack!" Mary again cried peremptorily.

"She's taking it with a lot more sense than you are, son. I'll see that you have no reason to complain, Mary. I'll ask Mr. Clifford to talk over the arrangement with you. He can speak in better taste for me than I can speak for myself."

He took her hand, and there was a very real admiration — of its sort — in his gray eyes. He spoke in a lowered voice.

"Merely because Jack must go, I don't want it to be the end of things between you and the Mortons. I hope I may have the pleasure of seeing you soon."

"Perhaps," said her lips.

"I shall count on it!" — pressing her hand.

He turned away. "Well, son, are you ready? I've made an engagement for you for to-night."

But Jack sprang to Mary's side, and seized in both of his the hand his father had just relinquished. His handsome if weak face was working with indignant, protesting passion; for the moment he was strong and sincere and fine to the capacity of his nature.

"Mary, I'm not going to stand for this! I'm not going to leave you in this way — I'm not that kind of a rat!"

"We're going to do just as your father says, Jack," she said with quiet dominance, her face very pale. "What he suggests is wisest for us all."

Jack stared at her; he could not read whether there was subterfuge or utter finality in her words. But whatever her purpose, he recognized that in this situation her way had to be his. His figure slumped down, and he turned about.

"Put into a suitcase whatever you may need at once; you can send for your other things," said his father, and pressed him through the door. "Mary, after a few minutes in the next room with me, Mr. Clifford will return for a talk with you. For myself this must be good-night."

"Good-night."

Bowing, he went out. As Clifford — mere audience — followed him, he saw that Mary stood un-

changed: stiffly erect, and pale and composed — though he had a sense that her dark eyes were unnaturally wide.

When Clifford reëntered the room fifteen minutes later, Mary was lying face downward on the couch, her whole figure taut. She heard him come in, and at once spoke, not changing her posture: —

"You've been talking all this while?"

"We spoke for only a few minutes. The rest of the time I've been sitting in there, thinking." Then, with a savage burst: "I would n't have let Morton use me, only I wanted to see you again!"

"What did he say?"

"He told me to settle with you on any reasonable terms." Clifford stopped and waited, but she did not speak. "Want to know what he might possibly give?" he demanded.

"What else did he say?" she asked, not moving.

"A lot of things — to the general effect that you were a damned decent, square little sport."

She made no response to this.

"Why did you accept the position he put you in, of being Jack's mistress?" he burst out roughly.

"I could not help myself — unless I wanted to ruin everything."

"Surely you do not still hope to save that situation?" he exclaimed.

She did not answer, and again there was silence. Then the doorbell rang.

"Shall I answer it?" he asked. "It's probably Jack slipped up for a private word."

"I'll answer it," she said.

She rose from the couch. He had expected signs of conflict, agony, perhaps tears or hysteria; — if only there should be a real outbreak of hysteria! But her face was composed and clear-eyed.

She returned a moment later, bearing a large box, on its top in gilded letters the name of the florist who had a shop opening on the Mordona's lobby. She removed the lid and disclosed a rich mass of orchids. On their top lay a small envelope such as florists have in stock for the convenience of patrons. From this she drew a card, which she read and then passed to Clifford without comment. It was Mr. Morton's card, and on its two sides was closely written: —

I am going to be a lonely man to-morrow. Won't you save me from myself by dining with me at the Ritz? — and then an act or two of a play, and then supper wherever you like? I'll telephone you. — The West Indies are heaven just now, and I'm thinking of chartering a yacht. A cruise of a month or so in those waters — But shall we talk it over to-morrow night?

Clifford gazed at her, automatically handing her back the card. Rage surged up in him, and he seized the box from her arms and, stepping to the window near which they stood, he raised it, and threw far out into the Drive some fifty dollars' worth of orchids. He drew down the window and turned back to

her. But her look expressed neither approval nor disapproval.

"Well, you see where you are!" he said grimly. "And you once called them the Golden Doors!"

She nodded, but otherwise did not respond. Her face, fixed absently on his, was intently thoughtful.

Her silence, her control, her look of far-away thought, stirred both anger and consuming curiosity. "Well — what are you going to do? What's the way out?"

"It's not the way out I'm thinking of — it's the way in," she returned slowly, quietly. "The Golden Doors are going to open."

"Open! How?"

"I do not know."

"Through that Mr. Mor—" he was beginning, when he noticed that her fingers had mechanically torn the card across.

"I do not know," she repeated quietly. "But they are going to open. And now, please go — I want to think."

He gazed at her a moment, marveling that such unforeseen manipulations of Life, Life the great moulder and remoulder, had not seemed to change her ambition, her pride, her will, her girlish confidence: he understood her — yet she was the eternal mystery! Then he left her, standing in the middle of the hired drawing-room, mechanically tearing into tiny sifting flakes the invitation to a voyage among perfumed seas.

CHAPTER XIV

MARY FACES A CRISIS

CLIFFORD had just gone, and Mary now sat alone in the ornate drawing-room which for a brief week she had occupied as "Mrs. Grayson," and considered rapidly the situation in which her own will and the unforeseen working-out of life and human nature had, within the last half-hour, suddenly placed her. Concrete questions, with their inseparable difficulties and dangers, rushed upon her: What was Clifford going to do? What was Jack going to do, whose mistress she had just declared herself to be before his father? And what would be the next move of Jack's father, amiable forgiver of what he considered Jack's discreet liaison, whose invitation to a yachting tour for two among West Indian seas lay in tiny fragments upon the floor? — which invitation, she knew, he would soon repeat and press for an answer. And most especially, just what was she going to do herself to make her way safely through all these dangers which beset her plans?

Again she recalled Clifford's grim words: he was through interfering with her, he was going to leave it to Life, to the shaping forces of Life's experiences, to make her or ruin her. Well, she was going to show him! She was going to make Life her tool, her ally,

her servant — she was going to bend all its currents to carry her in the direction of her desire!

And then for a space she felt herself at a loss in this new turn of affairs. She felt the instant need of the guidance of some one near to her. Clifford? No, she would have nothing to do with him now. Her brother Slant-Face? But her present situation was not the sort in which the skill of her brother, whom discretion had necessitated her neglecting, could possibly avail her. And then she thought of Uncle George. He was her friend, he would understand her; and no one could give more shrewd counsel, could plan more cunningly, than this urbane old master of the follies of the world and of the stratagems by which the world could be made to believe his wishes to be its own inborn desires. Yes, she would call in Uncle George.

And then, suddenly, she had a different vision of her situation. For the present, at least, she must act alone. She arose quickly. Those questions that had been so prompt to ask themselves, those dangers that had presented themselves so vividly, they indeed pressed her sorely; but most pressing of all, she decided, was that she should move from here where all could find her to some obscure hotel, where she might remain undiscovered for a few days and have time in which to plan and act. She ordered the trunks up; and at once, with the help of her maid, she set about the packing, which was quickly finished since she and Jack had brought nothing to this

richly furnished apartment except their clothes. All her own things for which she would have an early need she put into one steamer trunk and a bag.

She had changed into a traveling-suit, had paid and sent away her maid, and was standing in the hall of the apartment watching the baggageman tag the trunks and taking from him the claim checks, when the apartment door opened and in stepped Jack.

He stared at Mary, at the trunks, at the change that had been made in their brief home since he had left it two hours before. But he stood quietly at one side, until the baggageman had shuffled into the corridor with a trunk humped upon his shoulders.

"Mary, what does this mean?" he demanded sharply.

"I'm just leaving; I have n't time to tell you now. I'll write you or telephone you."

She started past him, but he caught her arm. "Mary, I'm going to know this now! And I'm going to understand everything else!"

He was white, and so wrought up with excitement that she perceived that whatever problems she might be facing, the most pressing and the most dangerous was the barely suppressed frenzy of the young man before her — which frenzy, if not controlled and insulated, might bring about an explosion and cause half a dozen other explosions. "Come on," she said, and led the way from the stack of trunks through the drawing-room, so recently the scene of unforgettable drama, into the study, where there was a heavy door

that gave privacy and in which minor explosions could take place unheard. Jack closed the door, and stood with his back against it — a tense, white, haggard figure, made to seem all the more haggard by the contrast of the unemotional formality of evening clothes.

"I was at dinner with father and Maisie Jones — she's the girl they want to marry me to — and a few others, but I managed to give them the slip!" he said rapidly, by way of explaining his presence. "Tell me" — his burning eyes were fixed on her — "what do those trunks mean?"

She told him the truth; not the whole of it, but what she did tell was true enough.

"You're not going to do anything of the sort!" he declared. "But we won't argue that point now. First tell me this — why, in the name of God, when my father discovered you here at the Mordona two hours ago, did you admit that you were my mistress? Yes, and made me admit it!"

She spoke quietly, hoping to calm him by her reasonable voice. "It began with your father's mistaken conception of our relations. His mistake saved us. It would have been foolish not to have fallen in with his mistake. Surely you understand that?"

"I did n't understand it, and it made me sick!" he cried. "I backed you up, just because I knew you wanted me to. But I'm not going to stand any longer for this lying, this living in secret! I'm going to end it!"

"End it? How?"

"I'm not going to let my father, or any one else, think of you as my mistress! I'm going to tell him we're married! And from now on everything's going to be in the open!"

She had never liked him more than just then. Whatever else he might be in the future, she would never be able to forget him as he was at this his highest moment — frenzied, outraged, dominated by reckless impulse. But she saw the danger to her dreams in this attitude.

"It's fine of you to say that, Jack, but you must not do it."

"Why not?" he demanded.

She strove to keep her reasoning, soothing tone. "It ought to be plain to you, Jack. You are entirely dependent on your father. If he were told of our marriage — particularly since he's so eager to have you marry that other girl — he'd be sure to cut you off in every way, and I'm not going to have that happen to you." Within herself she was also saying that if Mr. Morton were told of the marriage, and if she and Jack lived in the open, father and son would inevitably and swiftly learn who she really was — and that would end everything. "We must keep it all quiet, Jack," she went on, "and keep on waiting, and after a time we'll have our chance to win your father around. You leave it to me."

His face had suddenly darkened at mention of his father. "What did Clifford offer you in my

father's behalf, after we'd gone?" he demanded abruptly.

"Mr. Clifford told me that your father would give me in settlement any sum I might mention."

"And your reply to that?"

"I did n't make any reply. There was none."

"He'll expect a reply. He'll come for it himself, if necessary."

"That's one reason for my moving — because I knew he would come."

"Was that all dad offered?" Jack demanded. "You made a big hit with him."

She thought it best that the inflammable youth should remain ignorant of the father's invitation, convoyed by orchids each worth a bank-note, to the supposedly disespoused mistress of his son to join him in a very exclusive cruise.

"That was all that happened," she answered steadily.

Quickly, but without seeming haste, she shifted from this dangerous subject, back to their difference. "Of course you agree, Jack," she pressed him, "that we must still keep things quiet, and keep on waiting?"

His desperate mood was instantly back upon him again. "Even if we could keep up that pretense," he cried, — "why, you're forgetting Maisie Jones! You're forgetting my predicament!"

"Your predicament?

"I can't keep it quiet, even if I want to! Don't

you see? Now that I've settled down into a steady business man — your doing! — all parties are willing that Maisie and I should at once be formally engaged and then be married in a very short time. Father's pushing it across as though it were a big option that expired to-morrow. Get the fix that puts me in? There are only three things for me to do. Run away from it all, in which case dad'll be done with me as long as he lives. Or say I won't go through with the thing with Maisie, and give no reasons — which means the same result. Or else come right out with the truth that I'm married to you. See my fix?"

Mary saw; and swiftly judging her many-angled situation she saw that, however pressing other matters might be, this matter of the other girl was the first business that must be somehow adjusted if she were to realize her vaulting dreams — if she were to pass through the Golden Doors. And as she perceived this, she had an instant's realization, that this business of gaining the worldly heights, which had at the inception of her plan seemed so simple and easily achievable, was every day becoming more complicated, more tortuous. Again Clifford's grim words flashed briefly back: "I'll leave it to Life to test you." . . .

"So, you see, I might just as well come across with the truth about our marriage!" Jack exclaimed. "It's the best way out of the fix!"

Mary hardly heard him; she was rapidly consider-

ing this new problem. "You've never told me how it came about, this arrangement with Miss Jones."

"Oh, just the way such matters usually happen. Maisie and I have known each other for a long time; there's been a sort of unspoken understanding in our families that some day we'd get married — and I guess I fell right in with it. You see, I rather liked Maisie, and I'd never thought much about such affairs, and it did n't make much difference. But — well, you know, I have n't been behaving very well; and her people said there'd be nothing doing unless I straightened out. Since you've set me to work and kept me working, they've recalled their veto — and it's all right with them. That's about the size of the situation."

"What's her attitude toward you?"

"Maisie's? I guess Maisie rather likes me. In fact," he confessed, "though I don't deserve it, Maisie really likes me a lot."

"What's she like?" Mary asked quickly.

"You mean looks, or — or personally?"

"Personally."

"Maisie's an awfully fine girl," he answered soberly.

"Does she have any special interest? — something through which an appeal might be made to her?"

"I don't quite understand?"

Mary saw that for her purpose, it might not help any if he did understand. "Where is she staying?"

"At the Grantham."

"Who's with her?"

"An aunt; her father's sister, who thinks she manages Maisie. But Maisie does just as she pleases. — But what are you driving at with all these questions about Maisie?"

"I don't know myself yet. You can avoid committing yourself for a few days?"

"I suppose I can stall for that much longer."

"Then listen, Jack, — here's just what we've got to do," she said rapidly, dominantly. "No matter what you think, or feel, we've got to keep our affair quiet for the present, and go ahead just as we originally planned, except that you're to stay with your father. I'll not consent to any other arrangement, so it's no use arguing. You go every day to your office just as you've been doing; I'll call you up there when I want you. And don't be surprised at anything you see."

"But what are you going to do, Mary?" he insisted.

"I don't just know yet; I'll let you know when I do. If we keep our nerve it will all come out all right. Here are the claim checks to your trunks; I have ordered all the baggage sent to the Grand Central Station. You must go now, Jack, — you really must!"

She fairly pressed the bewildered, unwilling Jack from the apartment; and then for a few moments she stood in the hall, now cleared of her luggage,

rapidly planning. Then she shot down the elevator and hurried out of the Mordona to a taxi, — fortunately just missing Loveman, who she knew was coming here to see her, — and some twenty minutes later, again registered at the Grantham as "Mrs. Gardner." She was the occupant of a suite on the same corridor as Miss Maisie Jones, and had ordered her trunks brought from the Grand Central Station.

Settled here, she continued her planning. There seemed no end to the plans that had to be thought out, to the dangers that must be eluded and averted. And yet she felt confident — very confident.

But mixed with her confidence was an intermittent apprehension. She believed she had avoided the others. But Clifford — if Clifford would only not interfere.

CHAPTER XV

LOVEMAN SHOWS HIS CLAWS

BUT the next morning came, and as yet there had been no signs of Clifford.

At half-past ten Mary rang at the door of Maisie Jones. Her plan for beginning their acquaintance was very simple, merely the adaptation of an ancient device belonging to her past with her father and her Uncle Joe Russell — the preparation of two letters addressed to Miss Maisie Jones, which were in fact nothing more than modistes' engraved invitations to inspect new spring styles.

Miss Jones herself answered Mary's ring. "My name's Mrs. Gardner — these letters somehow got mixed in my mail," Mary began, smiling with the engaging frankness she knew how to assume. "I could have returned them to you by the maid; but the maid — it seems you and I have the same maid — told me that your aunt was ill, and I thought I'd bring them myself and make it an excuse to do such an un-New-Yorkish thing as to ask how a sick neighbor is."

"Aunt's not seriously ill," said Maisie Jones.

"But I suppose her illness means that you must stay pretty close to your rooms?"

"Yes."

"I can sympathize with you. I'm convalescing from pneumonia, and am supposed to rest the whole time. To confess the truth to you" — with a smile of guiltily humorous candor — "my real reason for bringing the letters myself was that I saw in it a few minutes' relief from this awful boredom of getting well."

Miss Jones hesitated. "Won't you please come in?"

Mary entered. The rest was natural development, a development which with her skill she made rapid. She was humorously frank about herself, and from personal bits which she adroitly dropped here and there, she let Miss Jones gather that she was the daughter of a New York family who moved among the city's smarter set, that her husband was in the far West, on business, and that the other members of the family — they were an irrational and self-centered lot — were at Florida and California resorts gratifying their various individual predilections.

Frankness begot frankness. Maisie Jones, a shut-in, was most willing to talk; but Mary, though making a show of lively interest in what was said, was shrewdly studying the girl. Maisie was strikingly handsome — a specimen of the American girl who has been through a fashionable school and then had a successful year or two in society. Mary catalogued the qualities her plans must take account of: she was spoiled, willful, proud, jealous — possibly vindictive.

This first study of Maisie completed, and the open-

ing made for future meetings, Mary started back to her suite, thrilling with confidence. Her plan was under way! And she was going to succeed, even though she was going it alone!

But when she entered her sitting-room, she stopped short. For from a chair had risen the smiling person of Peter Loveman.

"Good-morning, my dear," said the little lawyer.

"How did you get here?" she demanded sharply.

"I told the people at the desk — I know 'em all here — that you'd telephoned for me, and had asked me to come right up. Your door was not locked. That's all."

"But how did you know I was staying here?"

"I'm afraid you were followed from the Mordona last night," he answered placidly.

"How many know this?"

"Two or three — not many more," answered the little lawyer.

So then she was not to have her few unmolested days in which to mature and execute her present designs. Her dangers were in point of time closer to her than she had thought. Well, she must work all the more quickly, all the more skillfully.

She seated herself, and he resumed his chair. "Of course you've come here for a reason, Mr. Loveman. What is it?"

"That was a fine little idea, Mary, we originally worked out for this affair," he began amiably — "for you to marry Jack Morton, keep the matter

quiet until you were fixed solid with Jack, and until conditions developed so that you could win over his father. Yes, a fine little idea. It would have landed you at the top, where nothing ever could have touched you."

"What are you thinking of now?" she asked sharply.

"Nothing, my dear, — only we both know that fine little idea has had a great fall, and all the king's horses and all of God's angels can't ever put that idea together again."

"What are you thinking of?" she repeated.

He did not reply at once, but smiled affably and softly rubbed his hairless crown. The shrewdest brain of its kind in New York had done a lot of thinking in the last sixteen hours. Certainly the first stages of the plan, the plan as he had planned it for himself, had fallen down calamitously. And he had seen the further stages of the plan (as the plan, unknown to Mary, concerned him) menaced with sudden danger — and had seen even himself, personally, on the brink of uncalculated misfortune.

"Is n't it plain what I'm thinking of, Mary?" he said after a moment. "After what happened yesterday, it does n't count for much that for the time you made Mr. Morton believe you were only Jack's mistress. He's certain to learn the facts very shortly; your whole plan is the same as exploded. You may stave off the end for a day, two days — but hardly longer."

She refrained from speaking of her present enterprise. "What do you think we ought to do?"

"This has always been a business proposition for you," he replied in his amiable, reasoning manner, "and the way things have turned, it naturally is going to be a business proposition for me — Mr. Morton being my client, you know. So let's consider how we can make the most out of it. Now, first item, Mr. Morton is bound to find out the truth in a few days. If he finds it out for himself, nobody's going to profit. We simply lose, say, ten thousand dollars. My first proposition — this is small money, of course — is that we arrange to beat Mr. Morton to this discovery. You know, for some time I have been under directions from Mr. Morton to follow up Jack's doings. Now, let's say that to-morrow I turn in a report that the detectives I've employed have just discovered that Jack is married — which will mean a bill for detective service of at least ten thousand. Right there is ten thousand saved out of the ruin. Of course I'll split it with you."

Mary managed to control her expression; she saw a few things regarding Loveman she had not suspected. "And after that?"

"Of course Mr. Morton will want to institute proceedings for a divorce, and naturally I'll be retained as his attorney. You 'll make him pay big for the separation; and I being on the inside can tell you the limit that you can make him pay over."

He smiled at her genially as though it were a settled matter which Mary's good sense would applaud. Now that the time had come to do business, and since he considered that Mary was in this with him, he had not hesitated to reveal a fragment of his method as a specialist in domestic affairs — which was to play both ends and every point between. Smiling, he expectantly awaited Mary's approval.

"And after that's done, then what becomes of me?" she asked.

"Why, my dear, it will be handled so that you'll come out of the proceedings with a pretty fair reputation and holding tight to the name of Mrs. Jack Morton. With such a handsome woman as you are, and such a start, there's nothing I could n't do with you if you privately put yourself under my direction! Nothing!"

He rubbed his soft, finely manicured hands in excited anticipation, and let his speech run free. "Honest, Mary, this is the big thing I've seen in this business from the beginning. I never thought anything really big or permanent would develop from that marriage. Compared to other prospects, that was only pin-money — only the starter — only the prologue. The curtain really goes up when we're through with this. Mary, my dear, if I were to tell you what I've done for some women in this town — you'd certainly sit up! I don't know now just what I'll do with you; I'm an opportunist — I always play for the biggest chance that comes along

at a given time, or for the biggest chance that I can develop. But what I'll do for you will be strictly within the law — it may even be most thoroughly respectable. I tell you, Mary," he enthused, "with me handling you, with my knowledge of New York life and of the strings to pull, there is nothing I can't do for you! — I tell you nothing!"

His large eyes were shining on her brilliantly. Rarely had this master of domestic intrigue, this marvelously keen student of human nature and subtle manipulator of human weakness and ambitions, been stirred by his own excited imagination to such a frank, if incomplete, statement of the methods of his art. For a moment, despite herself, Mary felt half carried away by the power of the little man; saw herself for a moment as perhaps at some future time being fitted into one of his amazing plans.

"And for all this what would you expect?" she asked.

"Naturally a manager would expect a manager's share." And as she did not respond, he prompted her briskly: "Well, now, let's get back to the first proposition — though that's mighty small peanuts. I suppose to-morrow will suit you all right for me to give Mr. Morton my detectives' report that his son is married?"

"No."

"No! Why not? It won't be safe to put it off any longer."

"Mr. Loveman," she said quietly, looking at him very steadily, "I'm going straight ahead with the original plan."

He sprang from his chair, fairly sputtering surprise. "Why, you're crazy! You can't do it!"

"I'm going to try."

"But you'll fall down flat! You can't possibly keep this thing going for more than a day or two!"

"I'm going to try," she repeated.

"If you do, you'll not only ruin yourself, but you'll ruin some more of us, too," he said in consternation. "Why, yesterday, when Mr. Morton found me in your apartment at the Mordona, I had the closest sort of shave. And now, if you try to keep on with your plan, and the certain explosion comes, don't you see that Morton will learn that while retained by him I've also been sitting in the game with you? Don't you see you'll ruin me?"

"So that's why you've come to me with these new propositions?" she said keenly — "to save your own skin?"

"Yes," he said defiantly, "though those new propositions, the last one at least, were always part of the plan I'd had for you."

They were now standing face to face, she almost half a head the taller. "Peter Loveman," she said slowly, distinctly, "despite your skin, and my skin, I'm going straight ahead."

"What!" he exclaimed, astounded; and then: "You can't! There's that explosion, due in a day or

so — and after that you'll be nothing but smoke and dam' thin smoke!"

"I have my own idea of how to do it, and I believe I can succeed. Anyhow, I'm going straight ahead."

"No, you're not!" he said sharply. In a moment the usually amiable face had become grim with menace — and few faces could be more truly menacing. "If you won't play this game with me, Mary Regan, then this minute I cut you out of it and play the game alone."

"Just what does that mean?"

"It means that I'll not get as much out of it as if we worked together — but I'll *get it, and get it certain.* It means that in half an hour Mr. Morton will have my detectives' report telling of the discovery of his son's secret marriage and telling all about who the wife is. And it means that I'll handle the suit for separation — and that I'll collect for both services. And it also means that I'll deny, and deny successfully, any statement that you may make as to any relations between us. I guess that fixes you!"

"So, you'd do that!" she breathed, staring at him. Then, without another word, she crossed to her desk and took up the telephone. "Central, please give me Broad 9000."

In a moment Loveman was across the room and had seized her arm. "That's Mr. Morton's office!" he exclaimed. "What're you up to?"

Giving him no heed, she spoke into the instrument. "Is this Broad 9000? . . . Please tell Mr.

Morton, Senior, that Mrs. Grayson wishes to speak to him."

One of Loveman's hands closed with a swift, spasmodic grip over the telephone's mouthpiece, the other hand fiercely gripped Mary's arm.

"What's this you're up to?" he demanded huskily.

She gave him a calm, defiant look. For a moment they stood so, silent, the telephone clutched by both of them.

"I'm going to beat you to it — that's all, Peter Loveman. I'm going to telephone Mr. Morton about Jack's secret marriage and about who his wife is — and there'll be no big bill for detective services for you. And I'm going to tell Mr. Morton that I shall not oppose any kind of divorce or separation or annulment proceedings, and that I shall not ask for or accept one dollar in the way of settlement — and that means there will be no big fee for you for handling a difficult case. Out of this you'll get exactly nothing. Now, I guess that fixes you!"

His large eyes gazed at her with an almost superpenetration. But there was no doubting that she would do as she had said. His usually ruddy face, gone pale the moment before, now took on a yellowish tinge. Then he laughed with forced joviality, and removed his hands from the telephone and her arm.

"That certainly was once that one of my jokes was taken seriously." He laughed again. "Why, you

poor child — of course I was n't going to double-cross you!"

She was not deceived by this swift change of front. She knew that she had shown the higher card.

"Is what you say to be interpreted as meaning that you will not interfere with my plans?"

"Go right on!" he said heartily.

"All right." She hung the receiver on its hook and set down the telephone. "But if ever there is any interference which seems to come from you, I'll do exactly what I said."

"Oh, come, Mary, forget my bit of gun-play. You ought to know that I was only fooling." He was now thoroughly amiable again, as far as smile and manner went. "Just how are you going to do it, Mary?"

"I'm going to do it — that's all I can definitely say as yet. And now, I have a lot to think about —"

"And you'd like to have me go. All right, I'll go. But say, Mary, — you sure have nerve!" he exclaimed, with a sincerity that was sincere. "Nerve, and a lot of other things. And remember this: I'm counting on putting you across, a little later, in the way I just told you about. You're just the woman I could do it with — big! Big — you understand! Good-bye."

As the little lawyer went out, Mary took a deep breath. That was one danger, and an unexpected danger, that she had narrowly averted. . . . Her quick, eager mind flashed ahead to a picture which

his words had suggested: "Put you across — big!" Perhaps later, if her present plans went awry, she might want to be put across in some magnificent way — who knew? — and Loveman was the one man to do it.

But for the present, Peter Loveman was to be trusted just so far as he could be trusted.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STRINGS OF HUMAN NATURE

LOVEMAN had been gone no more than fifteen minutes, and Mary was thinking upon her plans, balancing this prospect against that danger, when her telephone began to ring. She took it up, and to her dismay the voice that greeted her over the wire was the voice of Jack's father. His first words she did not hear at all — her senses were almost wholly concentrated in dismay that two of the persons from whom she had sought seclusion had within a single hour learned of her whereabouts! How soon before all would be about her again?

"How did you learn where I am?" she asked automatically.

"Why, you called me up awhile ago, and said Mrs. Grayson wanted to speak to me," he replied. "When I tried to answer, you had hung up. But Central located the telephone the call had come from."

Mr. Morton went on to ask to see her at once — anyhow, not later than luncheon. She considered whether she should see him again, after her admission of her liaison with Jack, after that orchid-smothered invitation to a voyage in tropical waters — or should she evade him by once more running away? But running away would mean the abandon-

ment of her plans involving Maisie Jones — and that she could not do. Besides, at the best she would only delay the meeting with Mr. Morton; the meeting itself was inevitable.

While her lips replied to him, her mind considered rapidly. Should she see him alone — or in public? Only by a solitary meeting could she reduce the ever-present danger of accident prematurely revealing her identity to him; but a solitary meeting, in view of what he supposed to be her character, might prompt him to make open advances of a sort suggested by his perfumed invitation — which advances she dared neither permit nor too bluntly repel. And then she thought of what might be a way out — the small Japanese Room just off one of the large dining-rooms: this would give her the protection of both privacy and publicity. She suggested it to Mr. Morton, and he promptly said he would reserve the room and would meet her at half-past twelve. "Please remember this," she ended, — "here at the Grantham I am known as Mrs. Gardner."

She slipped down shortly after twelve, to avoid the danger of recognition by any one in the crowd of lunchers who would come in a little later. But as she passed through a hallway on the main floor, she glimpsed a square figure behind a newspaper — Bradley. She went on without pause and slipped into the Japanese Room. So Bradley, too, had learned of her whereabouts!

Ten minutes later Mr. Morton entered, looking

as sprucely young as fifty can look, smiling admiration in the gray eyes that were more accustomed to a gaze of autocratic command. Mary had previously placed herself at the table so that she could see into the larger room without being seen, and during the preliminaries of their conversation her main faculties were surreptitiously directed beyond the hangings. Presently she saw Loveman enter the larger room. Instinctively she knew Loveman had followed Mr. Morton here, to keep close watch over what he did and what might develop. After her scene that morning with Loveman, she knew he would strike the instant he saw she was failing, or thought she was about to fail. Loveman and Bradley — her seemingly simple plan certainly was growing complicated!

And then a little later she saw Clifford enter. Her heart skipped a few beats: so, then, he was watching her, as she had expected! What might he intend doing? . . . Well, whatever it might be, she would go straight ahead!

Presently she had to give more heed to Morton, for he was touching upon things that were vitally personal. "Let me again applaud the discretion you showed in your affair with Jack, Mrs. Gardner," he was saying. "And again let me compliment you on your sensible attitude when you saw the affair had to be broken off."

"Thank you."

"Pardon my referring to the sordid money side

of things," he went on. "I was prepared to meet whatever you had in mind — but Mr. Clifford has reported to me that you would accept no settlement. I do not quite understand."

"I did not enter into the affair with Jack expecting to be bought off," she replied.

He looked at her keenly, but said no more on the subject. "There is one thing that has surprised me a bit, though, in so discreet a woman as you are, Mrs. Gardner: that is, your coming to the very hotel at which Miss Jones is staying."

"It is the hotel at which I usually stop."

"I was merely thinking that your being under the same roof might lead to some unexpected happening that would let Miss Jones learn — you understand. But you are very sensible and careful."

He leaned over the little table. "And now let's talk about you and me," he said softly. "What is your answer?"

"My answer?" she evaded.

"To my suggestion that we explore a more amiable climate — together."

Her back was against the wall. "I'd rather not have to answer."

"But your mind is made up?"

She hesitated. "Yes," she admitted. "But I'd rather not speak — not just now."

"Why not?"

"There may develop complications; complications which I can't now explain."

"But at least," he urged, "can't you give me a hint of what your answer will be, if complications do not interfere?"

She thought rapidly. He was pressing her hard from one direction, and outside sat Loveman, a danger from another direction — watching her, ready to expose and destroy her at the slightest sign of failure. Of the two she just then feared Loveman the more. She had to put Morton off — she had to have some weapon against Loveman.

An idea flashed into her brain — a desperate idea, but she was now playing a desperate game.

"Won't you please give me a hint?" he insisted.

"Well," she said, with the air of one consenting, "here is a proposition that may sound to you absurd — but then a woman is supposed to be irrational. For my own reasons I can't now tell you what my answer is, but I'll write it out in a letter and give it to you if you'll promise not to read it until you have my permission. That way you'll always have my answer with you. I may telephone or telegraph you, when I'm ready for you to open the letter."

"I promise," he agreed.

"Then I'll write it here," she said.

The waiter brought heavy stationery, and with Mr. Morton's fountain pen she began to write. He watched her closely until he was certain she was engrossed in her note, then stealthily he possessed himself of her handbag which she had left upon a third chair beside the table. This he cautiously

opened, and into it he slipped an envelope which he took from his pocket. Then he closed the bag and returned it to its place.

Mary finished her letter, thrust it into an envelope, which she sealed. This she held tentatively above the table.

"On your honor as a gentleman you promise not to open this until I give you the word?"

"Promise? I swear!"

"And you promise not to try to be — too friendly until I give you the word?"

"That comes hard — but I promise that, too."

She held out the sealed envelope. He took it, and also caught her hand.

"Even if I'm not allowed to read, I'm allowed to guess — and hope," he said softly; "and in the mean time, I'm going to call on you now and then — and for the sake of discretion, I'll take my chances and come unannounced." And smiling expectantly he slipped her letter into the inner pocket of his coat.

A little later, when they had parted, she met Uncle George near the elevators. It was evident that he, too, had just finished lunching.

"Mary," he said solemnly, "excuse me for not having failing eyesight, as a man of incurable senility should have — but really I could n't help lamping the would-be gazelle you were eating with."

"What's wrong with my doing that?" she asked defensively.

"Nothing at all, dear — nothing at all: only just remember that no matter what his song is nor how soft he sings it, he's an old goat in a canary's skin."

"I believe I can manage him," she returned confidently.

"I hope so, Mary — I hope so. But he's descended from one of the first families of Sodom and Gomorrah, and he's a wise party, and he knows what he wants and he knows how to get it, and he usually gets it, too."

Uncle George paused a moment, then added: "Excuse my seeing it, dear — I've got the habit of seeing things and can't break it. But did you notice that he put something in your bag?"

"No."

"Then if you don't believe my old eyes, you might take a look for yourself."

She opened her bag. There was the envelope Mr. Morton had slipped into it, unsealed and fat. Surprised, she drew from the envelope a folded packet of bills and rapidly fingered them.

"Ten one-thousand-dollar bills!" she breathed.

Uncle George nodded. "Just so. That's how he sings a little love song. But he can sing a lot of different sorts of songs, and he's a swell performer at a lot of other acts besides singing. That's all, Mary — except here's hoping you beat him in the end. But, though you're clever, I'm not placing any bets on you. Good-bye, dear."

Up in her apartment Mary considered the matter

of this money. Mr. Morton, she perceived, was playing the game as he saw it; and for the present, she decided, she must seemingly play the game in the same way. She returned the notes into the envelope, and slipped the packet into a drawer of her desk.

She thought over her situation as a whole for a few minutes. Her original plan involving Maisie Jones would have been difficult enough had she been permitted the few days on which she had counted in which to work it out uninterrupted, but this prompt injection of Loveman, and then of Morton, into her scheme, doubled the number of human objects which she must juggle without a slip. The situation was difficult, yes, — it would require the sharpest alertness of all her wits, — but she could do it!

Mary composed herself and went in again to see Maisie Jones, on whom she had promised to call after she had lunched. While they chatted Mary studied the girl with new intentness, dropping in adroit questions which would bring out revealing remarks. Instinctively she despised this daughter of plutocracy: a fluffy blonde, who had had every good thing in life served to her, unasked for, upon a golden platter, who had never once had to think for herself. She deserved just what was being planned for her! But despite Mary's scorn — which was, perhaps, composed in part of that hate which human nature feels toward its contemplated victim

— Mary perceived that beneath the girl's fluffy worldliness, she was fundamentally the sort of girl who develops into a woman whose life is centered upon her domestic affairs and domestic happiness — who demands and subsists upon loyalty. And Mary now knew enough of Jack to know what Jack, with his instability of purpose and affection, would in the years to come bring into the life of this girl.

Again, as in the morning, Mary one by one drew out the other qualities that lay beneath Maisie's girlish charm. She was spoiled, selfish, full of temper, vindictive — and also she was proud to the last degree, and she seemed inflexibly a Puritan in mind and impulses. It was upon the last two qualities, of pride and inflexible Puritanism, that Mary's quick mind based her now swiftly maturing plan.

Presently Mary, in her rôle of a member of the smarter New York set, brought her light, humorously cynical talk about to some of the men she knew — to rumors of their none too circumspect *amours;* and then, quite casually, she mentioned Jack Morton.

"You know Jack Morton?" Maisie Jones asked.

"I've met him — yes."

There was a quick flash of jealousy in the blue eyes. "I happen to know him, too, — a little. Is he — is he like those other men you spoke of?"

"You mean in regard to women?"

"Yes."

Mary appeared not to be aware that this topic

had a personal interest for Maisie Jones. Also she had swiftly calculated how she must handle this particular business. If she told Maisie outright some scandal concerning Jack, Maisie in her pride might refuse to believe her, and the matter would end right there. Maisie had to be so led that she believed herself to be leading, and whatever she learned she must apparently find out for herself.

"Miss Jones, these men are all alike," Mary answered lightly, "and they say Jack Morton is the most alike of them all."

"But — but I'd heard that Jack Morton was very steady just now."

"That's the little way men have." Mary gave the soft, cynical laugh of the wise young woman of fashion. "The more that men have to hide, the more steady and proper do they try to appear."

"You mean that he is — that there is a woman —" Maisie Jones could get no further.

"So they say. And I'm told he's the same as engaged to a nice girl in Chicago — poor thing!"

There was a brief silence. Mary discreetly avoided looking in Maisie's direction.

"Are you — are you certain about that other woman?" asked a strained voice.

"I've seen him about with her several afternoons."

"Afternoons? I thought he was busy till five o'clock."

"That's a man's oldest pretense, being busy all day."

Again a brief silence; then again the strained voice, trying to be steady and indifferent:

"What is she like?"

"I tell you what," said Mary casually, "if you really want to know, I think I can show her to you — with him. I've noticed them having tea together at the Biltmore several times recently. If you like we can go there for tea this afternoon — it will do us both good to get out — and in the big crowd there at tea-time we'll never be noticed."

"All right," said Maisie.

"Then suppose you call for me at my apartment at four."

It was so agreed. Mary said that she might be a few minutes late because of an errand she had to do, but that she would leave her outer door unlatched so that Maisie might come right in and wait for her, and she told Maisie she need not ring, as her bell was out of order.

Mary went away with a sense that her delicately devised plan was now under full way; and she saw, as though the event were now concluded, just how Maisie Jones would react when she, Mary, pulled the strings of human nature. On learning what she believed to be the truth, Maisie's Puritanic soul would be so horrified that she could have nothing more to do with Jack; and further, her pride would not permit her ever to let the public know that she had been neglected for another woman, or possibly even jilted. Her pride would make her keep Jack's

secret for her own self-protection, and make her forestall the possible appearance of being jilted by herself doing the jilting first.

All that now remained, before Mary should be safe again — barring interference from Clifford — was for human nature to react according to human promptings.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OTHER WOMAN

MARY sat on the bed in the bedroom of her suite, trying to moderate Jack, who had furtively stolen up five minutes before in response to her telephone summons. The stage was set for the last act of her carefully planned version of the eternal triangle, — the time for the curtain to rise was near at hand, — and as she talked to Jack she kept her ears alert for any sound that might come through the open door connecting with her sitting-room. This would denote the entrance of Maisie, and was to be the cue for the action to begin on which she had staked everything. To prevent any misadventure to her plan through the automatic habit of ringing bells, Mary had disconnected the wire.

She had not told Jack of the rôle that he was to play, for she had not dared to trust him with the knowledge that he was playing a rôle — he might balk; so she had the added difficulty of so managing him that he would play a part without even guessing that he was play-acting.

"I can't stand this situation any longer, Mary," Jack fumed. "I want to come out with it all! Think of me having to sneak up here to see my own wife! And think of the other angle of my damned situa-

tion — being fairly shoved to the brink of the altar with another woman. I can't stall that thing off for more than a day or so longer. Then I'll simply have to come out with the truth — our being married."

"Jack," she said sharply, for there had been dynamite in his temperish speech, "you must remember what you just agreed upon — that even when we're alone you are not to refer to my being your wife, or to our marriage. You are not to speak of those things again until I give my consent."

"All right, Mary," he groaned.

"For the present we've got to keep up the pretense that our relationship is what we admitted before your father. You promise that, too?"

"All right — I promise. But this is certainly hell!" And he looked his misery; for his habit of life had accustomed Jack Morton neither to suffering nor self-restraint. "But say, I don't see that you're working out anything with Maisie Jones — at least I've felt no relief."

"You will if you keep your promises."

She looked at the little gold clock — Jack's gift — on her dressing-table; the hour was exactly four. She must now, with her utmost carefulness, steer the dialogue without Jack's guessing that it was being steered.

"What we're doing is for the best, Jack, — you must trust me as to that," she said. "But, of course, things were a lot more comfortable when we were at the Mordona."

"Why, our flat there was heaven!" he exclaimed. She had him talking on the right tack now, and he held the course enthusiastically. Her ears reached out for other sounds than his words; and after a minute or two she heard a slight noise in her sitting-room — and she knew that Maisie Jones had entered; and she knew — in fact she was visualizing it — that Maisie had heard Jack's voice, that Maisie had suddenly paused and was breathlessly listening.

"It was pleasant, Jack," she said distinctly — her mind's eye seeing the effect on the tense figure in the next room.

"I'll never forget that little flat, sweetheart," he enthused. "That week we spent at the Mordona — say, that was living!"

"And as Mr. and Mrs. Grayson —"

"I wish we were back there now, Mary!" And he seized her hands.

"Perhaps when you get things straightened out — and suspicion quieted down —"

"You mean about Maisie Jones?"

"Yes. Perhaps then we can go back to our flat in the Mordona."

"No. Not back there. The Mordona won't be safe for us until — you know! But this old town is full of other nice little flats — where we'll be quiet and cozy and nobody'll ever find us out. And we'll do it the minute you say the word!"

"And I'll say the word just as soon as it is safe.

You must go, Jack, in just a minute, for I'm expecting some one."

Enough had been said; her little scene was now complete; the listening figure in the next room could put but one interpretation upon what she had heard. Mary let Jack hold her hands and his ardent gaze she returned with a seemingly equal ardor. But her faculties were really all in the next room, witnessing what was happening there. She visioned the girl as standing transfixed at this evidence of Jack's faithlessness; and then in pain, in a fury of pride, stealing silently away — later to say, if by any chance she ever again spoke to Mary, that she had changed her mind and had decided not to come that afternoon.

That stricken, creeping figure was what Mary visioned; that was the way she had calculated human nature would react. What she actually saw, the next moment, was Maisie Jones standing in the doorway, her hands clenched so that her white gloves had burst at a dozen seams, her figure trembling, her blue eyes blazing fury.

"I've heard everything!" she gasped. "Oh, you —"

"Maisie!" breathed Jack, staring.

"Oh, you sneaks — you liars — you beasts — both of you!"

"Maisie — you don't understand — listen —"

"Don't come near me!" She backed through the door. "Don't come near me!"

He followed her in consternation, Mary behind

him, until all three were in the sitting-room. "Listen, Maisie, for God's sake!" he cried. "You don't understand —"

"Oh, yes, I do understand!" the furious girl flamed at him. "After what I heard, I could n't help understanding! You're simply a low, vicious, lying beast of a man, Jack Morton, — you with your pretense of having steadied down and become a worker! And this woman you've been living with — your — your —"

He had seized her wrist. "Maisie," he said, "say what you like about me. But don't say a word against Mary — for Mary —"

"Jack, stop!" Mary cried sharply, thrusting herself between the pair. She was dismayed by this unexpected development of her carefully constructed triangle — but if she could end this scene quietly the situation might somehow be saved. "Stop, Jack!" she added warningly. "What she says won't hurt me."

Maisie, her control now all gone, turned her fury and scorn full upon Mary. "You adventuress! You common street woman! You cheap seller of yourself! You — you —"

Jack gasped at her enraged words, then broke through Mary's intervention.

"You shall not say such things about Mary!" he cried in an almost equal rage. "Mary is my wife!"

"Your wife!" repeated Maisie.

"Yes, my wife!"

"Jack, be still!" cried Mary. "Miss Jones, he's lying to protect me. I don't like the words you used about me; but in substance they're the truth."

"They're not the truth, Maisie!" Jack, for that moment, had passed beyond Mary's control. "She's my wife, and nobody can say such things about her! She's my wife, and I can prove it!" Swiftly he took a wallet from an inside pocket of his vest, drew a slip of paper from it, and thrust it into Maisie's hands. "There — look at that!"

There was neither time nor chance for Mary to interfere. Maisie glanced at the slip of paper. Her volcanic wrath suddenly subsided; her face blanched. Then mechanically her lips repeated the script in the printed form she held: "John Harrison Morton and Mary Russell Regan."

She looked up; she was in a daze. "Your marriage certificate, Jack," she said in her mechanical tone. And then questioningly: "But Mary Regan?"

"That's Mary's real name — she just borrowed the name of Mrs. Gardner," Jack explained. "You see we were married secretly because Mary thought father would object to her; and also because — don't take this in a wrong way, Maisie — because of what father wanted you and me to do."

"I see," said the heavy lips. She turned to Mary, "But those things I just overheard? And your pretending not to be Jack's wife?"

Mary's plan had gone so far from its calculated course, and so swiftly, that upon the instant she saw

no better way than to tell the truth — even if she should not tell it all.

"Miss Jones, I planned for you to overhear, and believe, what passed between Jack and me — though Jack had no knowledge of what I was doing. I thought that if you discovered that Jack was in love with another woman — and had been living with her — your insulted pride would cause you to break with Jack and give no reason."

"Yes — go on," breathed the girl.

"You see, Jack was in the worst sort of a predicament. He was married to me; he was dependent as to his future upon his father; and his father was trying to press him into an immediate marriage with you. It was a matter of days. Had he told the truth or had he for no explained reason broken with you — either would have ended him with his father. There was only one way out of the situation that would not ruin Jack, and that was for you to be the one to break it off. To play upon you so that you would do that, that's what I've been trying to do."

"I see." The girl, grayish pale, regarded Mary in dazed wonderment. "But why did you, just a moment ago, try to make me believe that you were Jack's — his — his mistress?"

"To keep Jack's father from learning the truth. Don't you see it? If you should tell his father that you had learned that Jack had a mistress, it would not injure Jack's prospects nearly so much as if you told him that Jack had a wife."

"And, Maisie," Jack cut in, "if I have steadied down, it's because Mary made me! I want you to know that!"

The blue-eyed girl, standing very still, and breathing very tensely, made no response, but kept her gaze fastened upon Mary. Mary tried to guess what was passing in the mind of this girl — young, willful, of proven jealousy and temper, who, holding that marriage certificate in her hand, held also Mary's fate. What was that girl going to do?

A minute or more passed, all three of them motionless and silent — a space Mary was never tc forget. Then the tableau was sharply broken by a soft knocking at the door of the suite. The three turned about, just as the unlatched door swung cautiously open and into the room stepped the elder Morton, his masterful face bouqueted with a smile. He stopped short and the smile was plucked away.

No one of the four moved or spoke; then followed tense silence which, though but a moment long, seemed an epoch to three of the group — each of whom sensed a different charge of human dynamite, its fuse sputtering, in this scene. . . . The elder Morton, here on such other business, looked penetratingly at the unexpected trio: did the presence of the three mean that Maisie had learned the truth about Jack and Mrs. Gardner? — which would disrupt one of his dearest and most patient plans. And also did they suspect why he was here? . . . As for Jack, he was merely stricken dumb and powerless with a

sense of unavertable disaster — the axe was already falling. . . . And Mary, her will nullified for the moment by a sense of futility, breathlessly watched the grayish face of Maisie Jones, who, in the hand that now held the crumpled marriage certificate, also held the swift *finale* to all her planning; each second she expected the outraged, jealous, and vindictive girl to speak, or hand the crumpled paper to the gray-templed man beside the door.

It was the elder Morton, trained by his worldly experience to keep on playing his part whatever the circumstances, who ended this hour-long moment.

"I just started to call on you, Maisie," he explained evenly, pleasantly, "and at your door I learned from a maid that you were with Mrs. Gardner. I pressed the bell-button, then knocked, but as there was no answer, and as the door was open, I ventured in — and here I find the three of you."

Mary felt the uselessness of further effort, since the other girl held her fate in her tightly clenched hand; but her inborn quality of keeping on mechanically forced words from her lips — though as she spoke them she recognized her words as a lame explanation. "Miss Jones was going out with your son, and as she was passing she stopped in for a moment."

Mr. Morton looked keenly at Maisie, and waited; and Mary looked at her, in suspense yet sure of the end, and waited.

Then the gray-faced girl spoke for the first time

— and her fingers twitched about the document she held.

"Yes, Jack and I were passing, and just dropped in."

Mary maintained her outward composure, but inwardly she started. So! — Maisie Jones was holding back her weapon, waiting her chosen time to strike.

Morton seemed to accept Maisie's words; but before another word could be spoken, while all the dangerous human elements of the situation were in suspense, Mary saw a new figure press open the unlatched door — Peter Loveman. In a flash she understood the little lawyer's presence: that dread which had caused him to be forever hovering about her and Mr. Morton had made him follow Morton here — that he might be beforehand and save himself, in case of mishap to her impossible plans.

Her mind, working with incredible speed, had another instantaneous fear. Every instant she expected Clifford to enter and add to the complications swarming upon her.

Loveman's round, keen eyes swiftly took in the situation. To him this coming together of the four of them face to face, of Mr. Morton, Jack, Mary, and the girl Jack had been directed to marry, could have but one meaning, one outcome. His speech followed his conclusion so promptly that there was barely a moment between his entrance and his first word.

"Pardon my coming up here, Mr. Morton," he said rapidly, stepping forward, "but the matter is so immensely important as to abrogate formalities. I have just made a discovery —"

"Mr. Morton," Mary interrupted sharply, pressing between the two men. She knew that yet a new destruction was in Loveman's next eager words; and her instinct to keep on fighting to the very end instantly controlled her. "Mr. Morton — before you hear him, read my letter!"

"Your letter?" queried Mr. Morton, taken aback by the suddenness of all this.

"The letter I gave you in the Japanese Room. The letter I told you to hold until I gave you permission to read it. You have it with you?"

"Yes, here it is, Mrs. Gardner." He drew an envelope from an inner coat pocket.

"Mr. Morton, I've just discovered —"

"Read my letter first," Mary again broke sharply in upon Loveman. "The time has come that I spoke of, Mr. Morton, — the time when you have my permission to read my letter. It tells you all that Mr. Loveman has discovered and more!"

"Mr. Morton —"

"You wait, Loveman. Mrs. Gardner first."

Mr. Morton ran a forefinger beneath the embossed flap. The little lawyer was yellowish-pale, there was a spasmodic quivering of the soft folds beneath which his Adam's apple was throbbing. Mary saw Loveman's condition, and with a seem-

ingly involuntary action, laid a hand upon the finger of Mr. Morton's that was sheathed in the envelope.

"That letter contains everything, Mr. Morton. I was n't quite ready for you to know it. I 'd rather you did not know it yet — but Mr. Loveman has forced me." She turned to Loveman, and her next words had in them a hidden meaning for him, and another meaning for Mr. Morton. "Since you are determined, Mr. Loveman, that Mr. Morton must know it, I prefer that he learn it from me — and that he learn everything."

In her steady glance, the sallow little man read reckless defiance — and beneath her words he read the offer of a bargain. And he had a swift sense, vague as yet, that the situation might not be as desperate as he had at first believed.

"If Mrs. Gardner really prefers that nothing be said about it just now —"

"I do prefer," she interrupted him.

"Why, then, naturally, I'll not say anything at present — provided Mrs. Gardner agrees to say nothing."

"I agree."

"And the letter?" softly suggested Loveman.

"With your permission, Mr. Morton," and Mary deftly slipped the envelope out of his hands.

"But, see here, the letter was mine!" Morton exclaimed. "Where do I come in?"

"It is my confession, is it not? — and has n't a woman the right to choose the time when she makes

it? You shall know everything — when the right time comes."

She turned to the little lawyer. "I believe that is all, Mr. Loveman."

"But the letter?" he prompted.

She understood. "You definitely promise?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then" — and slowly, all eyes upon her, Mary tore the sealed letter up and dropped the pieces into the waste-basket.

There was a moment's pause. Each of the four had his own belief as to the revelation in that letter she had so calmly torn to fragments. As for Mary, she was outwardly composed enough; she believed that the crisis with Loveman was safely passed — perhaps; but every second she was poignantly aware of the danger represented by that motionless girl who still held the marriage certificate in her hand. Mary could not guess what that emotional, jealous, pampered girl would do, nor at what instant she would do it.

Mr. Morton turned from Mary to Jack and Maisie. "Run along, children," he said pleasantly, "and do whatever it was you were planning to do. I may pick you up later somewhere."

Almost mechanically the girl walked out. With a quick glance of fear at Mary, Jack went after her — and Mary followed her with her eyes, wondering.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW MAISIE JONES REACTED

MR. MORTON turned upon Mary the instant Jack and Maisie Jones were out.

"Mrs. Gardner, how much did Miss Jones learn or guess about you and Jack?" he demanded sharply.

"You saw the scene, you can draw your own conclusions," replied Mary. "If you wish to know definitely, I suggest you ask Miss Jones."

"U'm. She did n't seem to know just what to make of the scene — but I don't believe she suspected anything. You carried it all off mighty well, — Mrs. Gardner, — mighty well; in fact you saved the situation. Loveman" — with sharp rebuke — "you damned near spilled everything, trying to blurt out your discovery before Miss Jones!"

"That's once I did n't stop to think," apologized Loveman.

"Then suppose you excuse yourself and do some thinking outside. I want a few words with Miss Gilmore — beg pardon, Mrs. Gardner I should say."

"But — first I'd like a few words with Mr. Loveman," said Mary, — "alone."

She stepped out into the corridor ahead of Loveman, walked a few unsteady paces, and turned a corner. This corridor was empty. She halted.

"What did you want to see me about, Mary?" the little lawyer asked nervously.

"I did n't want to see you — I wanted to get out of that room — after what I've been through."

She leaned dizzily against the wall, and breathed like a runner at the end of a race. The situation she had just been through had, indeed, taxed her full strength; but her mind went on to dangers yet ahead. That girl with the marriage certificate in her hand — she had held back because she was waiting a better time, and a more effective method, to strike. And when she struck, she would strike hard — no doubt of that! Mary wondered in what form of cold fury the girl's natural feminine vindictiveness would express itself.

She opened her eyes. Peter Loveman was still waiting beside her.

"I guess I did n't quite get the situation when I broke in on that scene awhile ago," the little man began apologetically. "I thought it was all up with you — and I thought I might as well save myself if I could."

"I know," she said wearily. And then vigor came into her voice and bearing. "But don't forget this, Peter Loveman, — if you ever try to cross me again, I'll finish you off with Mr. Morton just as I said — even though I finish myself, too!"

"That's never going to happen, Mary," the little man said propitiatingly. "And remember, Mary, what I said to you this morning — that if this

affair gives any sign of going wrong, just privately leave your end of it with me — and after that let me manage you — and there's nothing I can't do with you! Nothing!"

She regarded him absently — although the vision his words had created registered itself in her subconscious mind as something that might come to pass in the future. Without answering him, she turned away and reëntered her apartment. Beside her door she came to a sudden pause. Bending over her desk was Mr. Morton intently working over something which she could not identify. But the next moment she knew. Mr. Morton had recovered from the waste-basket her torn letter and was fitting its fragments together.

Instantly she was across the room, and had caught his arm. "Mr. Morton, you must n't do that!" she exclaimed, reaching swiftly for the letter.

He easily warded off her clutching hand. She struggled to possess the fragments. But he was too powerful a man for her to contest with on equal physical terms, and she dared not cry out — so after a moment she gave up.

"Really, Miss Gilmore, you know, you can't trust a man's curiosity too far," he said coolly, though pleasantly; and holding her two wrists in a powerful, yet gentle grip, he read the torn letter through.

He looked up. His face was without expression.

"And so, Miss Gilmore — *this* is your confession?"

She nodded.

"And also your answer to my suggestion about our little cruise?"

Again she nodded.

"So!" He turned back to the ragged mosaic of heavy note-paper, and slowly he read aloud: —

"'I can no longer keep my secret from you. I am really a married woman. Further, my husband is very jealous. He may be back any time. I must be most discreet.'"

Morton raised his gray eyes to her; and then suddenly his strong, worldly face softened into a smile.

"My dear, what a little fool you are! This is nothing to make such a fuss about. Your being married does n't necessarily make the slightest difference to me — and I'm sure the Caribbean winds will be just as soothing — and that the moonlight will be just as soft. The yacht will be ready next Thursday."

He tried to slip an arm about her. But she evaded him, and spoke quietly.

"But my husband is now in New York!"

"Oh, the devil!" And then he smiled again. "But I'm sure a woman of your quickness of mind can invent an excuse that will take care of your husband. You can trust that my end will all be managed quietly."

Again she avoided an attempted embrace. "But he is now in this hotel — and he knows I'm here — and he's so jealous —"

"The devil!" This time he did not smile. "That

is some complication! You certainly do have to be discreet!" He thought quickly. "You'd better move from this hotel to some place where you will not be so easily under his eye. Anyhow, I was going to suggest your moving on account of Miss Jones. Being this close to her, she might any time stumble on to — you know, between you and Jack."

"I'm going to move to-night," she agreed, her mind all on how she was going to rid herself of him, and yet not offend him.

"Good! Now, as token and seal of our understanding —" He bent toward her with pursed lips.

She checked him with the thrust of a stiffened arm. "Not now!"

"Some day, then? And soon?"

She eyed him steadily. "Sometime, perhaps — if when that time comes you still want to."

He had no suspicion of what was in her mind. He smiled.

"Oh, I shall want to! But don't set the time too far —"

The telephone on her desk began to ring. In relief at the interruption she seized it — but the relief was gone as she heard the voice that came over the wire.

"Yes, I'm alone," she replied into the mouthpiece. "You may see me right away."

"Who was that?" asked Morton as she hung up.

"My husband."

"My cue for a quick exit! Remember, my

dear" — he seized both her hands — "we're going to have that little cruise just the same. I'll give orders —"

"You must hurry," she interrupted. While he had been speaking, she had reached quickly behind her back, opened a little drawer and thrust into it her hand. "You must hurry," she repeated, and urgently pressed her hands against him — and while doing so she slipped the envelope containing the ten one-thousand-dollar bills into the inner pocket of his coat. "Go, please! Good-bye!"

The next instant he was gone. Mary sank into a chair beside her window. She had won thus far through her wit and her will; but wit and will would serve her no further; she was spent — utterly spent. What was her culminating scene, the scene that would end her, lay just before her, and for it she had neither strength nor subterfuge nor courage. She had fought, through sheer force of habit, to the end — and at the end, which was only a moment ahead, she had lost. So she leaned back in her chair. limp, her eyes closed. . . .

But spent as she was she was sufficiently alive for her curiosity to respond to a matter that again recurred to her. Clifford had known of her whereabouts, possibly of her purpose. Why had he not interfered? . . . Why? . . .

A minute or two passed; then she became aware that some one had entered and had crossed to her side. She slowly opened her eyes, and wearily arose,

and regarded Maisie Jones dully, indifferent to denunciation or threats or furious acts.

"You telephoned you wished to see me," she said.

Maisie, very rigid and still gray of face, did not at once speak.

"Well?" prompted Mary.

"I came to tell you what I intend to do," said the other, and stopped.

"Go on. I know just about how you feel, and I guess I'd do about the same. I'm prepared, so don't try to break it easy to me."

"Of course," said the girl, — and there was a catch in her voice, — "of course you know that I love Jack."

"Yes, I know," said Mary.

"I love him so well," continued the girl, "that I don't want to do anything to hurt him." She swallowed, then drove herself on, her blue eyes gazing straight into Mary's dark ones. "I'm going to be honest. I'm not doing this because it's easy; nor because I like you — I can't do that yet. I'm doing it for — for Jack."

"Doing what?" breathed Mary, suddenly bewildered.

"I'm doing it because I see you can be more to Jack than I can ever be," the girl went on. "You're the sort of woman that can make a man — you proved that when you made Jack steady down and go to work. I could never have done that for Jack."

Mary could only stare.

"And I think it was big of you," the voice went on, now a choked and awed voice, "to try to save Jack by sacrificing yourself — by being willing to acknowledge yourself his — his mistress, and accept that humiliation, in order to protect him. I could never have done that either."

Still Mary, sure manager of her destiny, could not speak — could only stare at the white face which had begun to work.

"I shall return to Chicago to-night," the girl went on. "In a week or two I shall make my aunt write Jack's father, giving no reason, stating I no longer care for Jack and wish everything broken off. And I shall write, confirming this. That will put me out of the way — I'll no longer be a source of danger to you and Jack. I guess that's all. Good-bye."

She thrust the marriage certificate into Mary's hands and turned and started rapidly out. Then she abruptly turned and came back; and she gripped Mary's hands, and her blue eyes were flooding.

"I can't like you — yet. But I'm not going to let myself be mean about this," she said huskily, in awe and humility. "I wish I were as fine as you are! You are wonderful — wonderful!"

Suddenly she leaned forward and kissed Mary's cheek; and then, this time, she was gone.

Mary gazed after her with wide eyes, then sank limply into a chair. She had won — for the time being; but that she had won did not at this moment even touch her thoughts; nor just then was her mind

trying to justify her by saying that Maisie, as now she saw her, was too good for Jack, and that her own action, whatever its motives, had saved Maisie from a life of certain unhappiness. Just then she was dazed by the uncalculated twist of the girl's action; unsuspected, unanalyzable things were tumultuously stirring, quickened into life by that swift, tear-wet kiss which still thrilled her cheek — by the fervid declaration that she was fine and wonderful. That girl, tears in her eyes, had called her fine and wonderful! . . .

She seemed, with all those sudden strange things surging within her, to be sitting there a woman unknown to herself. And then out of this chaos, there rose a clear-cut, definite sentence, that remained fixed before her mind — a sentence of Clifford's, spoken with impersonal grimness: "There is a big woman in you — but if you are to be changed, only Life can do it." . . . Was this what it meant, that chaos within her? After all, had Clifford been right? Was Life doing something to her?

Bewildered, breathless, almost fearfully, she sat regarding this strange, unknown woman stirring within herself. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

MARY THINKS THINGS OUT

MARY awoke with a start to certain practical and immediate dangers of her situation. Mr. Morton knew she was here at the Grantham, and so did Peter Loveman; whatever she might do in the end, she had a desire to avoid both of these men for the present — at least until she had determined upon her course. There was but one way to escape them, and that was to disappear from the Grantham before either of the pair had time to return upon their different enterprises.

Within an hour she and her baggage were at another hotel. Within a second hour she was being shown about by a representative of a renting agency. That same evening she was installed in a little furnished apartment in the Nineties just west of Central Park. The better to protect her privacy she decided she would do her own housework and would go out rarely except in the evening.

Here her mind began once more to review her situation — as it was to keep on doing for many a long day to come. She had won, by an unbelievable twist of human nature. Yet she had not won; she was, as she now perceived, only at the beginning of an enterprise that was hourly becoming more complex

and difficult — and that was also leading into what for her were undiscovered and uncomfortable areas of the human soul.

To be sure, for the immediate present at least, she had apparently averted the danger of the discovery of her secret marriage to Jack Morton. But the danger of that discovery would keep on recurring — at least until she had finally won out. And there was the ever-present danger that her husband, and her husband's father, might somehow learn who Mary Regan was and had been. And there was the elder Morton, eager in his amorous suit. And there was Peter Loveman, who might any time, to serve his own ends, proceed swiftly upon some course that would mean disaster for her.

And then, there were those queer feelings which had been stirring in her since Maisie Jones, a choke in her voice, had called her fine! — wonderful! — and since Maisie, loving Jack, had declared Mary had proved that she would make far the better wife for Jack. Mary did not understand these strange emotions. She did not like them, and she tried to force them out of her being. But despite this effort there were fear-stricken moments when, with all her dangers, she felt that she could not even count upon herself.

The next morning she called up Jack, telling him where she was. He could telephone her as often as he liked, she told him, if he would be careful to speak only when he was alone. But she forbade

him coming to see her; that would be unsafe, as he might be followed. Jack protested against this order, but she was firm, and at length he gave his promise.

As the days passed, days when she had no company except her own thoughts and Jack's telephone messages, she reasoned herself out of the influence of those strange feelings begotten by the behavior and the words of Maisie Jones (at least she believed she did), and she reached a clearer conception of herself (or believed she did) and of what must be her future procedure. And the way she saw herself, her plans, her motives, was anything but unfavorable. She was just like most other women. She wanted position, yes — she wanted money, yes; and she was getting them in exactly the same way that the most proper and honored women were winning them, by playing her cards as a woman. As for what she was hiding — well, was n't all the world hiding something? She was merely doing what all were doing.

She came to see herself — despite the methods by which she would attain her end — as making a figure as a wife that Jack would be proud of before the world. As Jack's wife she was going to give him her best. No man's wife was going to be better-gowned or of more distinguished appearance, and no wife could do more than she, with the will and the brains which she knew she had, to hold her husband up to the standards expected of a man of large affairs. Later, after she had made Jack into a real

man, and through that service had somehow managed to get Jack's father reconciled, and after she had thoroughly established herself with them and as a noteworthy figure in their circle — later she would tell them just who she was and what she had been, and by that time Mr. Morton would recognize that she was the one woman in the world who could have brought, and could still hold, Jack to such a position of worldly success.

Thus she thought, as the lonely days went by. But as more and more she saw Jack as the foundation of her plan, so more and more did she see him in another possible aspect. This second possibility grew to be her chief concern.

All this while her mind had been reverting again and again to Clifford. After a time Clifford and her dominating concern began to be linked together. At length there came a day when, obeying an impulse, she called Clifford up.

Within an hour she was opening her door to him. Silently she led the way across the dingy, chintz-furnished sitting-room, and with a rather stiff formality the pair seated themselves.

"You sent for me," Clifford began, quietly enough.

"Yes. I want you to help me."

"Would you mind explaining?"

Already she had taken on that cool, defiant, challenging manner which seemed instinctive with her in all her dealings with him. "You helped get me

into my marriage with Jack Morton. You said that experience was the only thing which could make me over — and that this marriage might prove to be the best possible experience by which Life could change me. Remember that?"

"I did say something to that effect," he replied quietly, watching her and still wondering.

"Well, I am not going to be changed; I have told you that. But I have accepted your challenge, and I'll play the thing through to the finish. But you are partly responsible for my position. That's why I have the right to ask you to help me."

He stared. Only one so essentially defiant in spirit, so audaciously self-confident, could be saying such things so quietly.

"You want me to lose out," she went on, "but even so, I know you'll help me if you promise to do so. I'll admit that there is no other person I can call on who can really help me."

"Help you? How?"

"With Jack."

He was accustomed to her calm audacity. But none the less he was for the moment taken aback by her request — that he, a rejected suitor, should be so coolly called in to assist with the husband.

He recovered his speech. "Before I answer that, perhaps you will tell me something."

"What?"

"Something that has a bearing upon your plan with Jack. Excuse my curiosity — but perhaps you

will tell me just what was the outcome of your affair with Maisie Jones?"

She was no less curious than he in regard to one point in that experience — why he had refrained from action at the Grantham. She had been wondering about this, over and over, all these days.

"You know about that?" Her words were as much an affirmation as a question.

"I have had to know about it," he said. "I knew of Jack's engagement and its pressing character, and when you went to the Grantham and took the suite next to Miss Jones, I surmised, with the help of a few facts, the general nature of your purpose there."

"Then if you knew, why did n't you interfere?"

"When I surmised what your plan was, I felt it was no affair of mine. I was close at hand, but I kept myself in the background. I felt that it was your game, for you to play out alone."

She drew a deep breath. So that was his reason! — he had given her her leash, he was letting her run free. Though watching her, he was, as he had said before, leaving it to experience to make of her what it would.

She recalled his initial inquiry. "The affair ended," she said briefly, "by my being forced to tell Maisie Jones, in confidence, that I was secretly married to Jack."

"And Maisie Jones? I know she loved Jack."

"She promised not to tell, or interfere."

"Is that all? And if so, why?"

"She seemed to think — I did not try to deceive her; she deceived herself — she seemed to think I would make Jack a better wife than she would. And she said that, so Jack would n't get into trouble with his father about the engagement, she would have a letter written to Mr. Morton breaking the engagement off because she did not love Jack."

"Is that all?"

She met his gaze with composure, showing nothing of the strange and persisting emotion Maisie Jones had awakened in her. "That is all."

"Thank you." He did not pursue his inquiry, though his eyes regarded her keenly. "To come back to your request that I help you with Jack. Whether I help you depends upon what you intend doing. First, how do you happen to be here?"

Her answer was prompt and direct. "After all that has happened, it seemed safest and wisest for me to disappear. Too many persons were becoming mixed up in my affairs — I wanted to be free from them."

"How about Jack? Is he also in the dark as to where you are?"

"Jack knows. But I do not dare see him."

"And these are the only reasons you disappeared so suddenly from the Grantham?"

"The only reasons," she returned steadily. But consciously or unconsciously Mary here withheld part of the truth. There was something else: the unadmitted influence which the action of Maisie Jones had had upon her.

"Next, if I am to help you," continued Clifford, "what are your general plans for the future? You don't mind telling?"

"I don't mind telling you everything." And she went on to tell him those things which she had thought out more definitely during her solitary days. "My general plans are what they have been since I married. My main purpose at present is to keep Jack going straight — until through my influence he shall have become established as a responsible business man; this I expect to be an achievement for which I shall secure acknowledgment and which will win Mr. Morton's favor. And then, a little later, after I have established myself with them, and have been openly before the public as Jack's wife, I shall tell them just who I am and what I have done."

"And having done that, what do you think will happen?"

"I shall have proved to them that I am the one person who can hold Jack to the job of being a man; and I shall have proved to them that, despite my being Mary Regan, I can make a figure as a woman that Jack and his father will be proud of before the world. That is my plan."

The calculating worldliness of her frank scheme was amazing. Here was the strangest part of their recent relationship — she had made it a point always to show him her most worldly side.

"I see," said Clifford. "But there are a few diffi-

culties. How about the older Morton and his urgent invitation to a cruise for two passengers among the West Indies?"

"So long as I can keep in hiding, that's not a pressing problem. And if somehow he learns where I am, I shall be evasive; I can manage that."

"And Peter Loveman, if he finds you are here?"

"I can handle Peter Loveman," she replied confidently; and then added: "Not long ago he wanted me to give up my plan concerning Jack. In fact he threatened me."

"Why?" Clifford asked quickly.

"He said I could not possibly succeed. Also there was something else he wanted me to do."

"And you replied to him?"

"I told him I was going straight ahead. And I showed him that I was stronger than he was. He then suddenly became pleasant again, said his threat had been only a joke. If I called the turn on him once, I guess I can call it again if necessary."

Clifford made mental note of this threat. "Let's come back to Jack. Would you mind being more explicit why, and in what way, you want me to help?"

"All my chances of success are based upon making a man of Jack. As matters now stand, it would ruin everything if I were to see him often. Jack is very susceptible to the influence of the people immediately around him — and if I dare not see him, how can I influence him? That is my supreme difficulty."

"I see," said Clifford.

"Just there is where I want you to help me. Jack likes you. I want you to see a lot of him — help keep him working — help keep him straight."

Clifford stared at her. Her calm audacity was almost unbelievable — and yet it was just like Mary Regan.

"I'll help you," he said after a moment. "Is there any special source of danger you fear?"

"Only the general situation. Everything depends on Jack's being a man. Just now I can't help him much; and Jack — you understand — is likely to go in the direction of the person who is nearest him."

"I'll do what I can," said Clifford.

Then, for the first time since his entrance, she showed emotion. Impulsively she thrust out her hand and clasped his.

"Thank you!" she said.

CHAPTER XX

CLIFFORD'S NEW ASSIGNMENT

WHEN Clifford left her, though still amazed at the task she had set him, he was more occupied with a new possibility — Life worked so strangely! — that had come upon him during their talk. Had Mary, through her scheming to achieve worldly place and fortune by means of Jack, come by slow degrees and perhaps unknown to herself to have a real responsibility toward Jack? And if so, how would she react under that responsibility if ever a crisis should arise?

At once Clifford began work upon this strange assignment. And at once this assignment, strange as it was to start with, took on an even stranger twist — though this new turn was not at once definitely apparent.

Clifford was curious concerning Jack in his new rôle as a business man; and half an hour after leaving Mary he was shown into an office in a large suite down in the financial district. Jack sprung up eagerly from a littered desk.

"Hello, Bob! Say, this is great, your dropping in on me like this — a regular relief expedition to a strayed North-Pole-hunting outfit! Only, as a financier, I'm no Commodore Peary; I'm in the Dr. Cook class."

Clifford returned the smile of the pleasant, almost boyish face. "How goes the work, Jack?"

The young fellow made a grimace at the papers on his desk. "They've turned over a one-cylinder mining proposition to me to handle. Oh, ye gods! Bob — has science yet discovered an anti-toxin for work?"

"Then you're getting tired of it?" Clifford asked, studying him keenly.

"Tired, you bet! — and also tangled. But I'm going to stick it out." He lowered his voice: "You know, it's all Mary's doing, my starting to toil in this old foundry. She said I had to make good — and you can just bet I am going to make good!"

Clifford nodded. "It's great stuff; hang on with all your teeth. But you can't be on the job all the time. Suppose we have dinner together this evening and then see a show?"

"Sorry, Bob, but I'm dated up with dad tonight. If you'll make it to-morrow evening, though, you're on."

"All right. Say we meet at seven in the Gold Room at the Grantham."

It was so agreed. Clifford left Jack with one dominant impression: at least this phase of Mary's scheme was visibly succeeding — Jack, whom no one had ever been able to get to go to work before, seemed tightly anchored to his job.

The next evening Clifford was at a table in the Grantham at seven. He waited until eight — un-

troubled — but Jack did not appear and no message came from him. It puzzled him somewhat, but provoked him more. But, remembering his promise to Mary, he swallowed his resentment and the next afternoon he called Jack up at the Morton offices. He was informed that Jack had not come down at all the day previous, nor had he appeared this day.

Clifford began to think. That same afternoon, at six-thirty, which he had learned was the elder Morton's cocktail-time, he wandered into the lounge of the Biltmore bar. Here he found Mr. Morton, and casually he inquired for Jack.

"I was afraid the boy would n't stick," said the handsome, middle-aged man of the world, "and now I 've had proof of it. Here's a telegram I received from him this afternoon, filed on board the Canadian Express, saying he'd suddenly decided to run away for a bit of shooting. Just like him, to disappear without a word's notice."

Clifford read the telegram, and returned it to the Western financier; and after a few commonplace remarks he walked away with a casual air. But within his calm exterior he was seething with suspicions, ideas, questions. He dropped into a chair in the wide corridor, and eyes fixed on an evening paper, he rapidly studied this new situation. That telegram was a fake. Jack Morton, however irresponsible, would never so behave while he felt as he did toward Mary Regan. Jack Morton had disappeared, and

some will other than his own had controlled his disappearance.

Who had brought about this disappearance? If there was a plot here, just what was the plot? — and what its purpose? Was Jack himself the victim primarily aimed at? — his father? — Mary? — some other person?

Into his mind there flashed something Mary had spoken of: that menacing demand of Peter Loveman, coupled with Loveman's jovial declaration that his threat had been only a joke. Was that shrewd, far-scheming lawyer behind the disappearance of Jack? And if so, what was his ultimate object? — what was his present plan?

A new idea occurred to Clifford. A minute later he was in a telephone booth talking to Mary.

"What have you heard from Jack since I saw you?"

"Not a word." There was concern in her voice. "He always telephones me two or three times a day."

"And you've had no telegram?"

"No."

"There's nothing to worry about," — and Clifford told her of the telegram Jack's father had received.

"But why should n't he have telegraphed me, too?" she demanded.

"You know Jack is inclined to be careless, even with the people he likes best," he assured her. He gave her no hint of his suspicions; already it was

part of his vaguely forming counter-plan that Mary must be kept from guessing what he suspected.

He hung up and returned to his chair. He had picked up one point — perhaps. The fact that Mary had received no telegram, did it not signify that the person behind the scheme, whoever the person was, while wishing to reassure Mr. Morton, desired to disturb Mary? Might it not be an essential part of the scheme that Mary should be disturbed? It seemed possible.

Sitting there in the corridor, Clifford had still another idea — and during the days that followed it became the backbone of his plan. Here was mystery enough: the sudden disappearance of Jack in a manner so in keeping with his known character as to cause no public commotion. But he now saw this case as a double case. He was going to try to clear up Jack's disappearance, yes; but though professionally the solution of that disappearance was his chief interest, as a man he was more interested in Mary Regan — for though he knew her so well, she was to him still the supreme mystery. He was going to do all he could do, yes; but he decided that he was going to keep himself in the background of this new development of affairs, and direct the action, or leave it to its own direction, so that whatever situation arose, Mary would have to face it squarely and alone. He was going to force a show-down of Mary's real nature — to make Life test her. That was his second, and dominant, task.

The search for Jack Morton was the foundation for this second task, and Clifford sensed Loveman to be his best lead. That night, with all the appearance of merely killing time, Clifford sat at a little table in the Gold Room at the Grantham. But while he dawdled, he slipped an occasional glance across the big glittering room at the small round table known as "Mr. Loveman's table." The table was as yet empty: Clifford did not wonder at this — the hour was only eleven, this was the opening of a new play, and Loveman was an habitual first-nighter.

Presently a hand fell on Clifford's shoulder. "Hello, Bob, — what's wrong with the world?"

Clifford looked up. Beside him was the plump, smartly dressed person of Peter Loveman, smiling amiably.

"Nothing much is wrong, Loveman, — except most of my war-babies have whooping-cough."

"Buck up, old scout, and come over to my table, and let me buy you some bubble-water."

"Can't, thank you. I'm waiting for a party." And then Clifford, with seeming carelessness, but watching Loveman all the while, played a bold card: "What d' you think — I was to have had supper here with Jack Morton. And I just learned from his father that the young scamp has gone to Canada on a shooting trip."

Loveman showed a mild surprise; in him the stage had lost an admirable actor. "You don't say! I had n't heard that."

"His father showed me Jack's telegram. Jack might at least have sent me word before this," said Clifford.

"Just like Jack: a good fellow, but you can't count on him." Loveman's voice lowered. "I wonder if our common friend, Mary Regan, has heard anything from him."

"Not unless he thinks a lot more of her than he does of me," Clifford grumbled.

"Queer situation there, is n't it?" mused Loveman. "Would n't be surprised if he had treated her the same as he has you." The lawyer's tone became humorously lugubrious. "Well, we all have our troubles. Here's that little Nina Cordova. After I've said a fond, swift, and eternal farewell to twenty thousand dollars backing her in that awful frost 'Orange Blossoms' — honest, a guinea-hen that'd half-swallowed an open safety-pin would pull out its hair and eat bichloride if it had a voice like Nina's — here's Nina begging me to back her in a new piece that's a crippled and half-witted twin to 'Orange Blossoms.' Can you beat it! And yet I suppose I'll come across. That's just the sort of sucker game I always fall for."

With a gesture of mock despair, the little lawyer — true lover of the best in music and the arts, and patron of the worst — crossed to his table. Clifford knew that Loveman, as well as himself, had been fencing. He wondered whether he had made Loveman believe that he believed in Jack's northern trip,

and that he was unconcerned about Jack and Mary. He thought he had.

Clifford, alert for every possible clue, managed to keep an eye on Loveman's table. Presently he saw a lithe, handsome young man in close conversation with Loveman. It was Hilton, whom from a previous experience he knew to be a suave adventurer in this brilliant border-world wherein smart fashion and glossed scoundrelism mix in easy fellowship. So then Hilton and Loveman, for mutual advantage, had adjusted the financial *contretemps* which had risen when their plans had crossed that afternoon at the Mordona. This undoubtedly meant that something was brewing. Clifford would have given his balance at the bank and all he could have borrowed there, to have known the exact substance of their talk.

After a few minutes Hilton nodded as if some point had been settled, and with the grace of the professional dancer, crossed the great room and went out. Clifford's first impulse was to follow him, but he thought better of it and kept his place. He had his recompense, for a little later the dainty Nina Cordova entered with an escort. Soon, as if by the ordinary drifting of after-midnight merry-makers, she, too, was conversing with Peter Loveman.

Again Clifford would have been glad to trade his cash and credit that he might hear. He knew that this girlish-looking creature had been privately fitted into more than one of Loveman's adroit plans of this pleasure world; and he remembered, too, that

less than a year before there had been the beginning of an affair between Jack and Nina — that she, with fame glittering before her excited vision, had dropped Jack for what she always spoke of as "her art"; and he guessed that now, having been pushed by managerial enterprise beyond her meager merits as a singer in musical comedy, and having toppled ingloriously from her lofty dreams, she might have quite other plans.

If there was a plot, could Nina be in it? And if she was in it, what was her part? And if Hilton was in it, what was that gentleman's rôle?

Nina and Loveman went off together toward three o'clock. Clifford, alive with suspicion, followed in a taxi — only to see Nina set down at her hotel, and see Loveman drive straight to his apartment house and enter. Clifford watched the windows of the lawyer's studio apartment, wondering if any person had been waiting within to consult with Loveman; but promptly at four o'clock — Loveman's regular hour for going to bed — the studio windows darkened.

Clifford had learned nothing that was definite. But he had the sense, the result of long experience, that he was on the trail of the parties chiefly concerned, and that he was close upon something big — though that something was provokingly intangible and elusive.

There was but one way to handle so obscure a situation: that was by an intensive study of every

possibility, and the next day Clifford began upon this slow, cautious programme. Loveman's telephone wires had already been tapped by the Police Department. Clifford now took the vacant apartment above Loveman's and secretly installed a dictagraph in the big studio which served Loveman as a library. Always there were ears at these wires; and with the help of four of Commissioner Thorne's best plain-clothes men, Clifford tried to keep every movement of the suspects covered. Also he enlisted the aid of Uncle George, in whose ears the secret doings of Broadway were somehow mysteriously published. Loveman came and went about his business and pleasures, apparently as usual; Hilton was not seen again; Nina Cordova was seen only two other times; and once, for a few minutes in the Claridge restaurant, Clifford saw another woman with Loveman — one Nan Burdette, who had had a meteoric career in New York's pleasure life, and about whom Clifford had heard a thing or two not at all to that young woman's credit. And though she never knew it, Clifford personally kept a watch over Mary Regan. Some way, he felt sure, Mary was involved in this.

Also as part of this plan of studying all possibly related circumstances, Clifford scrutinized every available item of the pasts of Hilton and Nan Burdette and Nina Cordova.

But for all his own effort and the efforts of those helping him, Clifford still had little more than sus-

picion to explain the disappearance of Jack Morton. Jack could not have vanished more clearly had gravitation become suddenly invalidated and had he been shot off into space in the night.

Clifford kept doggedly at his method. It was all slow work, painstaking work, and tedious, tiring, undramatic work — as all good police work is and necessarily must be, except for now and then a turn of luck, a moment of inspiration. But after the fifth day following Jack's disappearance a change was noticeable: from the various sources of information which Clifford had set to work, little details began to be accumulated — bits of action that had been seen, fragments of talk overheard by the patient listeners on the wires. His accumulation of tiny facts increased rapidly; and fitting the fragments together he began to perceive the outlines of a plan, though as yet he had no proof — a plan which, if he was conjecturing truly, was a typical case of how clever powers may operate through and behind the brilliant activities of Big Pleasure — of how such powers may subtly twist persons to their own ends, the person never guessing what has really happened.

On the seventh day there came to him another fragment which made him see his conjecture as an even stronger possibility, which made him feel that this hidden plan was drawing toward its climax — and which caused him hastily to send off the following note to Mary: —

If you wish me to help you, then you must take no action without first referring it to me. And if any person asks you to do any particular thing, I want you to learn all the details of any proposed plan and then tell me, before you give your answer. You can invent plausible excuses for any delay.

The next day proved how correct had been the reasoning that had prompted the sending of this note, for in the afternoon he had a message that Mary wished to see him at once. He hurried to her apartment, quickened with suspense.

"Mr. Loveman has found that I am staying here," she began.

"I knew that. He was bound to find you sooner or later. Has he asked for anything?"

"He has invited me out for the evening."

"You are to go with him alone?"

"So he said."

"You learned definitely where he was going to take you?"

"Yes. To dinner at the Ritz — to a play at the Empire Theater — to supper at Delmonico's — then dancing at that new café, Le Minuit. Shall I accept?"

Clifford thought rapidly. "Certainly."

"What do you think is in his mind?"

"Merely to entertain you," — though Clifford did not believe his own words, — "to try to reëstablish himself in good standing with you."

"Then how should I behave?"

"Just have as good a time as you can."

Clifford was cool enough until he was out of her presence; then feverishly he considered what she had told him. Whatever this subterranean affair might be, if this invitation had any part in it, he reasoned that nothing would happen at such discreet places of entertainment as the Ritz-Carlton, the Empire Theater, or Delmonico's. Instinctively he knew that the design would unfold itself, if it were to be unfolded that evening, at Le Minuit, an establishment which had just then caught the errant fancy of some of the smarter social set, and naturally, therefore, of members of the smarter set of the demi-world and underworld.

His business, therefore, was to be at Le Minuit.

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE MIDNIGHT CAFÉ

MONSIEUR LE BAIN, proprietor of the Grand Alcazar, was a man of ideas and was by way of being a bit of a monopolist in his chosen business. But he was careful not to be his own competitor; so when he had prospered to the point where prosperity could be enlarged only by a second restaurant, he took great thought that he should not injure that excellent proposition, the Grand Alcazar. The result of this thought was Le Minuit, which he so named because its doors did not open until midnight.

Shortly after twelve Clifford, turning a few paces off Broadway, mounted a brilliant stairway. By being off the street floor, "The Midnight" gave a sense (an effect carefully thought out by Monsieur Le Bain) of privacy and also of piquant naughtiness. He was in evening dress; patrons of the place, male or female, had to be so garbed to pass the gold-braided guardian who held the outer door.

Inside the café, Clifford was approached by a head waiter.

"I want to see Monsieur Le Bain — at once," he said in that manner which head waiters instinctively obey.

The head waiter vanished. The next moment Monsieur Le Bain was approaching.

"Joe," Clifford began shortly, "this joint is being watched, and I've got my eyes on it, too."

"Honest to God, I ain't pullin' nothin' crooked here," responded Monsieur Le Bain, lapsing from his French accent into the one more natural to him.

"You'd better not try to," Clifford warned grimly, looking coldly and squarely into his dark eyes. Seeing that he had made his impression, Clifford inquired: "Mr. Loveman come yet?"

"No."

"But he has a table reserved for two?"

"Yes."

"Joe, you give me a table for one, close to it, so I can see Loveman, without being seen."

"I can fix you up with a cabinet particulier," the other said cringingly, "if it's privacy you want."

"I don't want to be alone in any cabinet particulier. I want to be alone where I can see. You're going to fix that up, Joe, — and you're not going to pass any tip along to Mr. Loveman. Otherwise you'll be hearing something from the Bureau of Licenses that won't be healthy for your business."

"Aw, now, don't get sore," said Monsieur Le Bain, "it's goin' to be just like you say."

It was. Two minutes later Clifford was in a nook at one end of the big after-midnight restaurant, a tubbed palm insuring him privacy from any save those who should purposely come investigating. A

few yards away, with a placard "Reserved," was the table that had been indicated as Loveman's. Along the nearest side of the room was a row of begilded doors, entrances into small private dining-rooms — Monsieur Le Bain's "cabinets particulier." The passing of waiters through these doors with loaded trays, and the issuance of laughter, informed Clifford that some of these rooms were already occupied.

Clifford's job was now a waiting job; and while he waited the appearance of Loveman and Mary Regan, he took in the restaurant. Le Minuit, though it advertised "newest decorations, most titillating dishes, most astonishing entertainment," was to Clifford the same old thing: its only individual appeal to the imagination was that it did not open till midnight, and that it was reputed to be supreme in the matter of naughty surprises. The pretentious mural paintings — the rows of mirrors inserted in the walls, framed with gilded plaster — the palms in tubs — the artificial vines, with their clusters of purple glass grapes hanging from the latticed ceiling: all was to him a wearisome duplication. And Le Minuit's cabaret was the same old thing — perhaps a bit more *risqué* than the average — except for its great feature, one Molkarina, a native Hawaiian dancer, who whirled and contorted and jiggled in what New York accepted as authentic folk-dances — — but who, as Clifford knew, had never been any nearer the much-sung island beaches than the Barbary Coast of San Francisco.

Of the three or four hundred persons who by this time were in the room, Clifford knew some by name, all he knew by types. There were a few indubitable members of the smartest social set for whom the wildest was becoming tame and cloying; and there were men and women hardly less well dressed, who lived by every means except honest effort — who were looking for pleasure and looking for prey; and in between these showy extremes were a few work-a-day persons who had come hither in a spirit of daring exploration.

Presently Clifford saw Mary Regan, obsequiously led by Monsieur Le Bain himself, and followed by the urbane little Peter Loveman, make way through the hilarious room and take possession of the reserved table. Clifford keyed himself to watch and listen. He sensed that he was now about to have revealed to him the heart of this whole business.

Evidently Loveman had given full orders in advance, for almost immediately supper, with champagne in an ice pail, was brought to the table. The talk at first was chiefly the amusing, disarming chatter of which Loveman was a master. Then by degrees it became more serious, then it shifted to Mary and her plans.

"Let's face the whole situation squarely, Mary," Clifford heard the little man say in his most plausible voice. "I'm perfectly willing to back you up in the original proposition — stand right behind you — the same as I promised — if you still want

me to. But let's not bunk ourselves. Mary, I'm telling you God's truth — it's a great game if you could put it over — only you *can't put it over!*"

"I've told you I'm going to try, Peter Loveman," she returned steadily, "and if you double-cross me, I'll do exactly what I said I'd do — and that means you'll be shown up to the Mortons and, besides, won't get a nickel out of them."

"Now, now, Mary, let's don't talk threats. Whatever the play, we've got to back each other's hand; and if your play seems the best play, I'll be right with you. But let's look at the facts sensibly, Mary. First fact, my dear: you're basing your hope of succeeding in your plan, — it was the original plan of us all, — you're building that plan, on Jack."

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Loveman?"

"I could n't help seeing what was in your mind, my dear. You've been trying to reform Jack. You believe that if you can steady Jack down permanently — make a real responsible man of him, which is what everybody else has failed to do so far — that you'll make yourself so solid with both of the Mortons, so much of a necessity, that they'll forgive whatever you've done and gladly take you on as a regular member of the family. And as a member of the family you believe you'll add to the Morton dignity and prestige."

"You think I can't do that as well as any woman?" Mary demanded.

"That part of it you'd do better than any other

woman!" Loveman hastened to reply. "But I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about what comes before that — your plan to make a man out of Jack. You never can do that."

"Why not?"

"Several reasons. Chiefly because Jack can't be made a man of."

"I can do it."

"Mary, let's quit kidding ourselves," Loveman returned gravely, quietly. "Unless you're with Jack constantly you can't influence him. And if you've seen Jack during the last ten days you've done more than any one else has."

Mary tried to speak calmly. "Jack recently left New York on a hunting trip."

Loveman shook his head. "Shooting would never take Jack away from New York; certainly not for ten days. He's just — I think you understand." He regarded Mary keenly. "You know Jack's old reputation; he used to show more speed than any man who ever entered the Broadway Free-for-All. He never cared much for song — but he was all for the other two members of the old trio. The last bottle was Jack's quitting place, and daybreak was his bedtime."

"Well?" demanded Mary.

Loveman answered slowly. "There's a rumor about that Jack's his old self once more; that secretly he's been in New York all the while, and that Broadway's got him again."

"I don't believe it!" cried Mary in a low voice.

"And I do," Loveman said solemnly — "though I have no proof."

Clifford could see that Mary, gazing across at the little lawyer, had turned very white. For all her confident exterior, he guessed she now feared that Jack had done just what Loveman had said.

"Well?" she challenged.

"If Jack has, — and I'm sure he has, — is n't it perfectly plain that you can never make a responsible man of him? And if you can't make a man of him, it's perfectly plain that you can never put your plan across."

"Well?" repeated Mary.

Loveman leaned farther over the table and spoke in a low voice — though Clifford got his every word. "Drop the game, Mary. It's a dead one. There's not one penny for you, or any one else, in trying to play it further. Drop it, and come in on the basis I spoke of a week or so ago."

Mary's face gave no sign of what she might be thinking. "Just what was that — if you don't mind outlining it again?"

"First item: I don't need to remind you that I'm retained by Mr. Morton to look after Jack; say in a week I bring in a report that Jack has contracted a secret marriage — which means a bill for ten thousand for detective services, which I'll split with you. Second item: he'll want a divorce; I'll handle the case and get a big fee — that's where I

come in. You'll not fight, if he'll pay high enough; that's where you clean up between a hundred thousand and half a million — and being on the inside I'll be in a position to tell you the top figure that Morton will pay. And third item: freed of this mess, and with Mrs. Jack Morton as your legal name, there's no end to the big propositions I could put across for and with you — you with your looks and brains, and I with my inside knowledge of New York domestic life. Big stuff — big, I tell you! I could land you close to the top!"

His enthusiasm, which had mounted as he spoke, now abated to a tone of solid, unanswerable argument. "That's why I say to you to drop your present impossible game, and come into these new propositions."

She did not answer at once; so that he was led to prompt her: "That's plain enough, is n't it, Mary? — that the thing to do is to stop thinking about Jack and come in on these other lines?"

"Perhaps," she answered steadily. "But first, I've got to find out about Jack. I don't believe what you believe."

"Well, I'm disappointed — though perhaps I don't blame you. But the proposition stands open."

With the philosophic sigh of the man to whom the world has taught patience, he fell upon the remainder of his half of the guinea-hen. Clifford saw him rub his napkin twice across his mouth, place it upon his knees, from where it slipped to the floor — which

may or may not have been a signal. But, at any rate, the next moment a waiter, who had been standing close at hand, opened the door of the nearest cabinet particulier. "Did you ring?" he said, and stepping inside left the door open. Mary's gaze, wandering from her table-mate, went through the doorway, and she saw, what Clifford also saw from his retreat: Jack Morton, his features soddenly loose, leaning in a stupor against the shoulder of a woman.

She stared fixedly at this picture so unexpectedly enframed by the doorway; then involuntarily there burst from her lips: —

"Good God — look!"

Loveman raised his eyes from his guinea-hen, and followed her gaze. "Well — of all things!"

The waiter, coming out, closed the door, and the brief picture was gone. Then Loveman turned on Mary, his big eyes wide with amazement.

"That certainly is some jolt! Not that I'm surprised at the fact — only surprised at our coming on it like this."

Clifford saw that he regarded her keenly. She was very pale and strained, but said nothing.

"Well, who guessed right?" he ventured after a moment. Then, more confidently: "That ought to settle matters, Mary. There's nothing else to it — you're coming in on the new line."

Again Mary did not speak. But for Loveman there was no need for her to speak. Clifford easily guessed what was passing in his mind. The danger

which she represented to Loveman was now averted; the plans which he was going to carry out with her were already successes. His active brain was leaping months, even years, ahead. This was one of the big moments of his life — one of those few moments when a series of great achievements become suddenly possible.

But Clifford could not see into the soul of Mary Regan; tensely he wondered what was passing therein — and waited.

CHAPTER XXII

MARY MAKES AN OFFER

MARY, gazing at that little door, was, for all her composed exterior, sick of soul: contrary emotions and impulses clashed within her. A fury suddenly possessed her. She had lost — been defeated in her great plan by the invertebrateness of one man. Well, Jack could go his champagne-bottled way to the inevitable end of such as he! She was through! . . . And then she remembered Maisie Jones, admiring tears in her proud eyes, and she recalled her trembling words of belief: "You can do what I can never do — you've proved that you can make a real man of Jack."

She rose quickly. "I'm going to get him," she breathed huskily.

"Wait — you must n't!" cried Loveman in alarm, starting up and clutching at her wrist.

But she eluded him, and made for the little door of the cabinet particulier, he at her skirt — and Clifford just behind them. What they all saw was a tricksy, ornate room, lighted with imitation electric candles; Jack now toppled forward limp and unconscious among the dishes; and about the table Nina Cordova, Hilton, that polished adventurer of the smart hotels, and Nan Burdette, high-colored, bold-eyed café favorite.

Mary moved inside, Loveman at her heels. But Clifford remained without, waiting. The situation was Mary's — for her to face, for her to reveal herself by.

Mary stepped quickly forward and shook Jack's shoulder. "Jack — wake up! Come on out of this!"

Jack, a limp weight, showed no life, but the other three did. Nan Burdette sprang up.

"Stop that! What d' you think you're doing?"

Mary flamed at her — and at Nina Cordova — and at Hilton. "I'm going to take him away from you blood-suckers," she said with cold fury.

"You call me that —" the café beauty was beginning angrily, when Nina Cordova, the petite, rose and checked her. "Shut up, Nan!" She leaned toward Mary, and spoke cuttingly, "Why, if it is n't the little dame that Jack lived with, and got tired of, and then gave the grand shake. Well, little one, what are you going to do with your darling sweetheart who loves you so much that he's run away to avoid the sight of you?"

Mary's voice was chokingly composed. She returned the other's ironical gaze with a glare of contempt.

"I'm going to take him away from you people — to where he can sober up — have a chance to think about it all — become himself. That's what I'm going to do."

"And what good'll that do you?" pursued Nina cuttingly — "since he's all through with you?"

"What he thinks of me has nothing to do with the case," Mary returned.

"Mary, it's no use — keep out of this!" cried little Loveman. He took her arm to draw her away, but she shook him off.

"I'm going to do exactly what I said I'd do. Come on, Jack."

"No, you're not!" Nina cried, suddenly sharp and venomous, leaning farther across the table. "You just try to start anything like that and I'll tell the Mortons who you really are — *Miss Mary Regan!*"

Hilton, finished gentleman of hotel, café, and ballroom, had moved around the table to her side. "And start anything, and *I'll* tell what I know," he said in a hard voice, his hands twitching. "And it'll be something besides what Miss Cordova will tell. I believe you get me, Mrs. Mary Regan Grayson!"

"And we won't put off telling till to-morrow!" cried Nina Cordova. She moved quickly to a little wall telephone, tinted in gray-and-gold to match the room, and took down the receiver.

"Give me the Biltmore. . . . The Biltmore? Connect me with Mr. Morton. . . . Mr. Morton, this is Miss Cordova. Will you please hold the wire a moment."

She muffled the mouthpiece with a palm and turned upon Mary. "Get out of this — or your finish will come in just one second!"

Clifford's eyes, taking in all, were centered on Mary, who was gazing at all these faces bent upon

her in menace. He saw that her impulses had come to a sudden halt; that she realized that these persons could, and would, do exactly what they threatened; that their telling would mean an immediate end to the ambitious plans for which she had schemed and worked and waited so hard.

There was silence in the little cabinet particulier; all the figures, save Jack's, stood in tense tableau — waiting. Clifford, looking through the aperture of the door, recognized that this was a climax in Mary Regan's life. Events, with some guidance from him had arranged a supreme test. The next instant would prove something — what? He was as taut as those within.

Mary, with slow calm, drew a deep breath; her figure stiffened. "Mr. Hilton, Miss Cordova," she said steadily, slowly, her eyes not leaving them, "you may tell everything you like. I am going to take Jack away from here."

At her words an exultant thrill leaped through Clifford. She had had her choice — and had chosen the way of her own destruction!

Mary put an arm under Jack's shoulders. "Stop that!" cried Nina, in sudden fury, dropping the telephone receiver and clutching the unconscious Jack, so that he was torn away from Mary's arm. With energetic fury she turned on Loveman. "Peter Loveman, make her stop! You promised me, if I'd come into this, you'd fix up a marriage between Jack and me!"

"Shut up, Nina!" Loveman cut in sharply, in half panic. "Mary," he cried, seizing her arm, "come on — let's leave her — quick!"

But the lithe Hilton did not depend upon the influence of mere words. From somewhere out of his elegant person he drew a small pistol, and this he thrust against Mary's side.

"Get out of this," he snapped, "or this gun goes off! And we'll all swear it was suicide. The gun's a lady's size, and suicides are common in joints like this. Get out!"

Mary did not quiver — she looked Hilton squarely in his handsome, evil face. At that instant Clifford stepped swiftly into the room and closed the light door behind him. The next instant he had wrenched the pistol from Hilton's hand, and pocketed it, and had seized both Hilton and Loveman by their collars.

"Cut out that rough stuff, Hilton, or I finish you off here!" he said. "And so, Loveman, I've got you at it again?"

The little lawyer twisted about — gave Clifford a startled stare — and then forced a smile intended to be tolerant, but which was sickly. "Why, Bob, I don't know a thing about this —"

"Shut up!" snapped Clifford.

He turned to Mary, who was still bewildered by his sudden appearance, and again the leaping thrill went through him. "Mary, you've gone through this great! Great, I tell you. And these people —

don't worry about them another minute. You've won out!"

Mary stared at him, now breathing quickly. "I don't quite — understand."

"You were not supposed to understand. There has been a big, careful, subtle plan, — a plot devised by Peter Loveman, — and you, without knowing it, were to have been the goat!"

"Oh, I say now, Bob!" protested Loveman; "you're talking like a melodrama. Why should I plot against Mary?"

"Why? Listen to your own words — you know whom you said them to." And Clifford quoted, driving his words savagely at Loveman: "'Say, but this is one hell of a situation! Here I went into a game to clean up in three or four directions, relying chiefly on the criminal instincts of a clever girl to see the game through — and, damn it, if the girl has n't turned straight on me! Or, if she is playing a crooked game, she's trying to play it straight. And the original game is no good now — is sure to fail. I want her to quit it, and come in on some other big proposition; but she won't quit it — she still dreams she can put it over. And if I openly block her, she'll blow on herself and me, and break with me, and that'll end everything. How's that for a hell of a fix!' Remember saying that, Loveman?"

Loveman had paled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"And remember saying this, Loveman?" Clif-

ford drove at him: "'I've got to have Mary Regan with us. But the only way out of this mess is to handle affairs so as to make her believe, from her own experience, that she can't succeed in her respectable game — then she'll come around to our way of thinking, and she'll try to clean up with us. And there's only one way to reach her — and that's through Jack Morton.'"

Clifford turned sharply upon Mary. "Is n't it clear to you now? — Jack's disappearance and all the rest? Loveman was determined your plan with Jack Morton should not go ahead. Since he did n't dare openly oppose you, he concluded that the best scheme to defeat you would be to get hold of Jack and handle him so that he would give himself over completely to dissipation — that would show you how hopeless your plan was, and you'd drop it. You've been framed, and Jack's been framed; and this wine party in here was part of the frame-up; and Loveman's letting you have a glimpse, as if by chance, of Jack in here, a hopeless *débauché*, was to have been the clinching argument that would make you give up and join in with him."

"Clifford," blustered Loveman, "everything you have just said is a lie! — and Mary knows it."

"Loveman," returned Clifford in grim wrath, "even though you are a small man, I'd hit you in the face if I did n't think it might improve your features." He turned again to Mary. "Hilton and Nan Burdette have been Loveman's chief tools for

keeping Jack drunk and out of sight; they're both experts at such business. Miss Cordova has been in it to help out in some of the finer points; she's an old-time friend of Jack, and you've just learned of an ambition of her own. That's the case, Miss Regan. I don't feel like praising Jack, but it's only fair to him to emphasize that he's not here because he tired of you, as they've tried to make you think. I want you to understand clearly that Jack is the victim of this smooth bunch; that whatever he felt toward you two weeks ago, he doubtless still feels; that whatever he then was, he probably still is."

"A lot of good that'll do her, when I tell what I know!" burst out the infuriated Miss Cordova.

"And I can tell a little that will help," grimly added Nan Burdette.

There was a glitter in Hilton's dark eyes, and he bared his white teeth. "And what I've got to tell will jam up her game even worse! You and she are not going to get away with this!"

"The three of you are going to say exactly nothing! Nan Burdette," — with sudden incisiveness, — "I know your part in that Gordon affair. Miss Cordova, I've got more than a hunch about that pearl necklace Mrs. Sinclair gave her husband to have repaired and which strangely disappeared. And, Hilton, I've got a lead about a certain lady who fainted — she really drank drugged tea — at an afternoon dance at the Grantham and whose diamond brooch was not afterwards found. I'd run

every one of you in this minute — only I'd rather keep things quiet and give Miss Regan her chance to do just as she pleases concerning Jack Morton. But if there is one word — and I'll know it, if there is — if there's one word from any of you that touches on Miss Regan, I'll get every one of you!"

He turned sharply on Loveman. "These are your people, Peter Loveman; working under your orders. You tell them to keep their mouths closed about Miss Regan; if there's a peep, something very unexpected is also going to happen to you."

"See here, Clifford," protested Loveman, "I've no control over them!"

"Believe it or not, Loveman, but I've got you, too," Clifford retorted sharply, "only I'd rather not close in on you just yet unless you make me. You'll give them that order and see that they obey it, or you'll get what you'll get!"

Loveman gazed for a moment longer into Clifford's set face. Then with a feeble attempt at a pleasant smile he turned to the others: —

"I guess you all understand that I'd like to have you do as Mr. Clifford says."

"That's all," said Clifford sharply. "Now, get out of here — all of you. You can settle your bills outside. I give you just one minute."

Within the minute they were gone. Mary and Clifford, alone in the little room, Jack still pitched unconsciously forward upon the table, looked at each other for a long space. Despite the fake Ha-

waiian music and the laughter of the mixed world of Le Minuit, which sounded through the thin partitions, there was in reality a deep silence between them.

"I want to thank you — I want to thank you very much," breathed Mary, at length.

He seemed not to hear her halting words. "Do you know what is the really big thing about all this?"

"What?"

He spoke very quickly. "By your action a few minutes ago, you proved that you are not wholly the worldly person you thought you were. The risks you then took were not to save your ambitious plan; you took them to save Jack. You forgot yourself. Through your own scheming Life placed a responsibility on you — and you accepted it. That is the big thing!"

She stared at him, bewildered questioning in her pale, dark face. He saw that she still did not understand herself — the impulses which had moved her — and which might still be moving her. For a moment she did not speak. Then she asked, looking down at Jack: —

"But what am I to do now?"

"That is for you to decide. When you have decided, I'll help you."

"If I take Jack from here —" She broke off; and stood gazing thoughtfully at the stupefied boy. "It would do no good unless — unless —"

Again she left her sentence uncompleted. The

insistent ringing of the little telephone, whose receiver was still dangling, caught her attention. She walked with a manner of decision to the telephone.

"Central, please get me the Biltmore," she requested steadily. "This the Biltmore? Please connect me with Mr. Morton. . . . Is this Mr. Morton? Mr. Morton, this is Mrs. Grayson — Miss Gilmore, you know. I am now at Le Minuit. I wonder if you would care to meet me here. . . . Very well, in ten minutes, then. I'll be waiting in a taxi-cab down in front. . . . My answer to your invitation? Yes — if you want my answer, I'll have it ready."

She hung up.

"He was referring to that cruise with him?" asked Clifford.

"Yes."

Clifford regarded her curiously: What was her purpose in summoning Mr. Morton into this situation?

"I want to get Jack down into a taxi-cab," Mary went on. "How can I do it? — and without attracting attention?"

"That's easy. Nothing of that sort attracts attention at Le Minuit."

He pressed a button, and from the waiter who appeared he demanded the immediate presence of Monsieur Le Bain. Two minutes later the proprietor entered.

"Joe," Clifford ordered briefly, "get Mr. Morton's things, whatever they are, and have two of

your waiters help him down into a taxi, and have the taxi wait till we come down. Everything quiet, mind you."

"Sure," said the Frenchman from somewhere below Fourteenth Street.

Presently two waiters supported the still stupefied Jack out of the room; a little later Clifford and Mary passed unheeded through the hilarious patrons of Le Minuit, down the stairway, and across the light-flooded sidewalk out into the waiting taxi-cab, in one corner of which Jack huddled limply. Here they sat silent, waiting. Clifford had a sense that it was not the old Mary Regan beside whom he sat — but that new Mary Regan who did not know herself: and he had a sense that, with her at least, big issues were still at stake.

Presently another taxi rapidly turned the corner and came to a pause just behind them. Out of this the elder Morton stepped.

"Wait here for a moment, please," Mary said to Clifford. She stepped out upon the brilliant sidewalk — and Clifford looked on, wondering.

"Oh, Miss Gilmore!" cried Morton, swiftly coming to her with an eager, expectant smile. "You were an angel to call me up — after not letting me see you for so long! Though," he quickly added in soft complaint, "it was n't very kind of you to run away from me as you did."

"You advised me to leave the Grantham," she reminded him.

"Yes, but I did n't advise you to go leaving me in ignorance of your whereabouts," he returned in an amiably hurt tone. "And that — ah — little present: was it kind to return it, without a word, the way you did?"

"You mean that ten thousand dollars? I did not need the money."

"No?" He smiled. "I thought a woman always needed money. — Well, my dear, now that I 've found you again I hope there 'll never be another such dreary hiatus in our friendship. You 're looking — but I 'm no poet! And at last I 'm to have my answer?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Good! I 've had that yacht put in commission. Everything is waiting. When 'll you be ready to go?"

"I 'm not going," said Mary.

"Not going! The devil you say!"

He stared at her white, set face. Dominated by his own pleasant conception of this situation, he had not till then really noted her bearing. He was completely taken aback.

"Well — you have your nerve! Then why did you ask me to come over here, and at such an hour?"

"I thought you might like to see your son."

"Jack!" he exclaimed.

She nodded. "He 's in here" — and moving back a pace she pointed into the car.

"My God — Jack!" breathed his father, as he

sighted the limp, exhausted figure. Then he saw Clifford. "You, Clifford!" he exclaimed sharply. "Where'd you find him?"

Clifford stepped from the car. "I did n't find him. Miss Gilmore found him."

Morton turned swiftly upon Mary. "So you've broken your promise and had him all this time!" he cried harshly. "You brought him to this!"

"Hold on, Mr. Morton," Clifford shot in. "Miss Gilmore had not seen him till to-night. To-night she found him in the drunken company he's been in for ten days. She got him away from them and sent for you. The least a gentleman — particularly a gentleman who has taken such poor care of his son — can do under the conditions is to try to apologize."

Morton glowered at Clifford. "If that's the case, of course, I apologize. But the question is, where's he been all this time?"

"It seems to me," put in Mary in the same quiet voice, "that the most important question is, what are you going to do with him?"

"Do with him?" demanded Morton, staring at her. "What's in your mind?"

Clifford had been, and still was, asking himself those same questions.

Mary, standing between the two men, gazed very calmly at Mr. Morton. "You've had Jack in charge for twenty-five years — and in there you see your work. He was with me awhile; during that short

time he tried to be, and was, a man. It's up to you to choose."

Morton stared — blinked his eyes — drew a deep breath. "Am I getting you right? Are you suggesting that Jack come back to you?"

Clifford now began to understand; though he had no idea — nor perhaps did she, for that matter, — of the degree to which she was moved by the tearful figure of Maisie Jones, breathing, "You are big — wonderful!"

"I think I might make a man of him," she said.

"You mean to resume on the old basis — the discreet Riverside Drive affair — and all that?"

"Just that. I'll do my best for him — provided he comes with your knowledge and consent."

He gazed at her intently. "You're a new kind to me!" Then, dryly: "No, thank you."

"I shall never ask you for a single thing," she urged.

He gazed at her, hesitating. It was not given to any of the trio to see then what a moment of great crisis this was. It was like the apex of so many of Life's crises — very quiet, very composed.

"No, thank you," Mr. Morton said with decision. "I have other plans for him. I shall now handle him myself."

"Just as you say. But remember, I made you an offer." Her calm expression did not change by a flicker. "Under the circumstances, the simplest arrangement would be for us merely to exchange

taxis. I suggest that you take my taxi with your son. With your permission I'll take your cab. Good-night."

She turned about, with her composed air of finality. "Will you please help me in, Mr. Clifford?"

Clifford did so. Over his shoulder he had a glimpse of the handsome, elderly man standing, loose-jawed, staring after her.

As Clifford settled beside her and the car sprang away, there was a sharp, breaking choke from her, and she dropped her face into her hands. After that she gripped herself and sat silent, rigid, as the car spun on. Clifford, gazing on her, wondered thrillingly what was happening within that taut figure . . . wondered what might happen in the days to come. . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

LOVEMAN'S FINAL PLEA

As the taxi-cab spun northward through the two-o'clock streets, Clifford continued to gaze at the taut figure of Mary Regan, and at her white, set face. It had certainly been an hour to try her soul, that experience ending a few minutes since at the Midnight Café.

To Clifford it seemed that all Mary's shrewd scheming had brought her up at last against an unsurmountable wall. Again Clifford wondered what was passing behind that pale face: wondered what was going to be the ending of her great worldly plan, which thus far had had so many undreamed-of developments: wondered how all this tangled affair was going to come out for her — and again wondered which of the two persons he knew in her was to be the dominant Mary Regan when this matter had played itself through to its unguessable conclusion.

The taxi-cab halted, and Clifford escorted her to the door of her apartment house.

"What are you going to do next, if you don't mind telling?" he asked.

"I don't know yet — perhaps nothing," she said absently. And then, with quiet vigor: "Jack's not to blame so much for what he is. It's chiefly his

father's fault. I wish I could make his father pay!" Her dark eyes flashed, her figure tensed with sudden purpose. "Yes, somehow I am going to make his father pay!"

She held out her hand, and gave him a steady look. "At any rate, I want to thank you. You've done all you could for me. Good-night."

"Good-night."

He watched her in — this strange, confident young woman, so tangled in the web of her own spinning, whom he had drifted into so strangely helping, and whom, though she could now have no part in his life, he knew he still loved. But back in the taxi-cab, his mind at once was on another matter. He had glimpsed Peter Loveman lurking within the doorway during the end of that scene in front of Le Minuit; and he knew that keen little lawyer was no man to give up merely because he seemed to be beaten. In fact Loveman would act all the more quickly for just that reason.

Clifford drove two blocks to the south, a block west, and a block north, then, ordering his cab to wait, he stepped out and walked north to the next corner. He peered around this and waited. Presently he saw what he more than half expected to see — Loveman crossing from a taxi to the entrance of Mary's apartment house. He saw him press Mary's button, and after a space saw Loveman push open the door and enter.

Clifford tried to guess what plan the little lawyer,

whose wiles he had exposed to Mary only an hour before at Le Minuit, could regard as so important that it had to be undertaken at two o'clock in the morning, without the loss of a single possible minute. He wanted to slip down the street, enter the house, and try to watch and overhear; but the chauffeur in Loveman's waiting taxi might also be Loveman's lookout and personal guard. There was nothing for it but to wait where he was and watch.

Within, up on the fourth floor, Mary stood outside her open door, looking down into the dark, narrow stairway, with its sharp turns and tiny landings. When the dim, mounting figure started up the last flight and she saw it was Loveman, she drew sharply back and tried to close her door. But Loveman, quick despite his plump figure, sprang up the final steps and thrust his walking-stick into the closing aperture. He tried to force the door with his shoulder, but Mary's strength on the other side was fully equal to his own and the door did not budge. He desisted, but kept the advantage held by his walking-stick.

"Come, Mary, my dear, don't be so inhospitable," he said through the crack, in a pleasantly complaining voice. "You know, I would n't have come at such an hour unless it was important. And you know I 'm your friend."

The door did not move.

"This is a raw way to treat your old nurse and playmate," complained Loveman. "Particularly

when I've come to tell you something that it's your business to know — something about Jack."

There was a moment's silence. Then suddenly the door swung wide open, and Loveman found himself looking at a small automatic and beyond that at the cold face of Mary.

"Come in, but behave yourself," she said briefly.

He entered and closed the door. "Your suspicion hurts me, Mary, dear," he said in his amiably injured tone. He raised his two hands, one holding the cane and the other his silk hat, high above his shining dome. "Just to allay your suspicions, so we can talk as good friends should talk, I suggest that you first frisk me."

"Don't be a fool, and don't try to be humorous. Put down your hands. I don't care how many guns you have — I can beat you to the first shot — and there'll be only one shot. What do you want?"

Loveman lowered his hands and laid stick and hat upon a table. "Mind if an asthmatic, dropsical, and almost moribund gentleman sits down while he talks?" He eased himself into a chair without waiting her consent. "Sit down, too, Mary. If you're going to murder me, let's make it a comfortable affair for both of us."

She took a chair, and sat alert with automatic held in her lap. "What do you want?" she repeated.

"First?" he replied with a smile of amiable frankness, "I've got to say that on the surface you do

seem to have every reason to suspect me. The way that business at Le Minuit turned out, and especially the way Clifford twisted it, it did look as though I'd tried to do you dirt. But those were only the looks — they were not the facts."

"Do you mean to deny that that affair was a frame-up?" she demanded sharply.

"I do not, for it was," he returned promptly. "Further, it was a frame-up chiefly against you. That brings me to the point that made me hurry here — a point that had to have immediate explanation. It was a frame-up, yes — but, honest, Mary, I framed you for your own good."

"For my own good!" she exclaimed skeptically.

"Exactly. Listen, Mary. I've got to repeat myself — but I can't help that if I am to make myself clear. Your big idea in this secret marriage with Jack Morton has grown to be to keep Jack at work — to do what no one else has ever been able to do, make a man out of him — so that after a time, when the big blow-off comes and they find out who you are, you will have established yourself so thoroughly by the service you have rendered that the Mortons will have to overlook everything shady about your past and your part in this affair. That's the way you had it doped out to yourself, now, is n't it?"

Mary did not answer.

"That was your plan — exactly. And your plan, all the big future you saw for yourself, was based

upon your making a man out of Jack. Mary, — I'm talking straight goods now, — I saw you could never make a man out of Jack. Nobody could or can. The stuff's not there. I saw you were headed toward certain failure — and wasting good months, and big chances, in trying to put your grand dream across. I told you all this and tried to talk you out of it, but you would n't listen to me. So I decided to try to prove my point by showing you the facts. I decided to frame you.

"To-night, I let you stumble across, as if by accident, Jack chloroformed by grape juice and in the company of those ladies. I admit I helped lead Jack into that. But I hoped you would see it as the real thing, see how hopeless any dream was that was based on making a man of Jack — and that you would quit the game right there. But my little act was a fizzle. Still, Mary," — and the little lawyer's voice was persuasively emphatic, — "even though Jack was led into this to-night, the picture you saw of him, that wine and woman stuff, is an honest-to-God picture of what Jack will be in a few months. Broadway has n't yet got him completely — but Broadway is going to get him! I'm telling you, Mary!"

Mary's face was expressionless. "You did n't come here merely to deliver that speech, Peter Loveman."

"Naturally, there is something else." His round, large eyes regarded her meditatively; then he leaned

forward. "Mary, I'm going to lay all my cards on the table. First, here's a bit of a confession: I hung around Le Minuit, and heard your offer to Mr. Morton to straighten Jack out, and heard him turn you down flat, and saw him drive away with Jack."

"Well?"

"Was n't that just so much more evidence to show you that your big dream can never, never come true?" he argued, quietly, but with the driving force of the great lawyer that he was. "So I say again, for God's sake, drop it all! And, Mary, — you'd never have been happy even if you had worked that game with the Mortons. You're too much the daughter of 'Gentleman Jim' Regan for that sort of life — your father's blood would have sent you back to the old ways.

"Listen, Mary, — the sensible thing to do is for us all to cash in on this Morton affair, before it breaks. I've said most of this before, but I've got to say it again. Let me discover the secret marriage between you and Jack; I'll soak Mr. Morton hard for a detective bill, and give you a half of what he pays. And by playing the thing this way, I'll keep solid with Mr. Morton and will be in a position where I can milk him for a long time to come. And then, of course, you'll make him pay big for a divorce — Morton will want to hush the matter up as far as he can, and he'll want to keep details out of court. And since I'll be representing Mr. Morton, I can

put you wise to the very limit he'll pay. What you get there will be all your own; I'll get mine out of handling Mr. Morton's end. And that business all settled, and you with the name of Mrs. Jack Morton — why, there's nothing big we could n't put across as team-mates! And everything safe — and everything big! And a little later, if you wanted it, I could, by watching chances and playing the cards right, help you make a marriage that would be a headliner in regard to wealth and respectability and position. Don't you see it all!"

She saw it, and it was a dazzling vision of its own kind. Moreover, she knew this shrewd little lawyer could bring it all to pass. And among other things his plan offered was the definite and immediate chance to strike vengefully at Mr. Morton, who an hour before had so coolly rebuffed her when, swayed by unaccustomed emotion, she had made him the proposal to devote herself to Jack.

At length she spoke. "That was another good speech, Peter," she said quietly, "but you did n't come here merely to deliver that speech either. Just what is the big thing that's in your mind?"

"Why, that you should drop your present game, instanter, and switch to something worth while."

"That's not what brought you here between two and three o'clock in the morning," she insisted steadily.

He shifted slightly. "It's like this, Mary," he said abruptly, changing from his persuasive tone — "you

and I went into this thing together, and I hope we're going to stick it out together along the lines I've just suggested. But matters took such a twist with to-night's events that I had to know definitely, at once, whether you were going to work along with me."

"And that's the question you really want answered?"

"It is. And I'm hoping your answer is going to be 'yes.'"

"I do not know what I am going to do," she said quietly, her dark eyes fixed upon his large blue ones. "But whatever I do, I shall do alone and exactly as I please."

He slowly wet his full, loose lips. "Is that final?"

"It is."

"You mean that you are going to leave me out of it."

"I am not going to think of you one way or the other." She stood up. "If that is all you came for, I suggest you now say good-night."

His soft hands gripped the arms of his chair. Fury flamed within him; words of menace surged to his lips. But Peter Loveman never had more self-possession than when his situation was most dangerous — and dangerous he certainly now felt it to be. So as he rose he smiled with good-natured regret.

"I'm sorry it's all off, Mary; it would have been big for us both. But you have the right to

do as you choose. Well, good luck to you — and good-night."

With a look of almost fatherly benignity, Loveman went out. Mary suspected that regretful, genial smile — but she thought of it only for a moment, for the next instant her mind was on other things. She switched out her lights, and stepping to a window she looked out into the deep silence of the night.

What should she do? At last she was alone face to face with her life's greatest crisis. She had played for big game — for wealth and worldly position — and she had played daringly — and now, at the end, after all her time and bold dreams and care and cleverness, it seemed that she had lost, and lost finally, unalterably. And after all, even had she won, would the winning have been worth the while? . . .

And then there was a resurgence of that self-confidence, that determination, which were such strong elements of her nature. Should she not make one last desperate effort to carry through her plan, despite them all? Her resentment toward Jack's cold, worldly father suddenly flamed high. Just to balk the older Morton she would like to save Jack and win out herself.

But how might it be done? . . . Almost unconsciously her mind began to revert with nervous intensity to certain methods of that period spent under the influence of her father and later of her uncle Joe

— that period of artful criminality that she had long thought of as forever ended. By use of her old skill she might so outwit Jack's father, might so involve him, that he would gladly come to terms.

She stood there in the silent dark, thinking feverishly.

CHAPTER XXIV

TWO PLEASANT GENTLEMEN

WHEN Clifford saw Loveman leave the apartment house and cross rapidly to his cab, he waited to see no more. His next move, as he had planned it, was based upon conjecture, and it had to be executed without a lost moment. He ran back to his waiting taxi-cab, gave the chauffeur Loveman's address, and thrust a ten-dollar bill into the man's hands.

"Keep the change, and forget the speed laws," Clifford exclaimed as he sprang in.

Five minutes later the rocking machine turned into Loveman's street. Save for his own car, the street was empty. Not waiting for the machine to slow down, Clifford called "Beat it!" to the chauffeur, leaped to the curb and walked rapidly into Loveman's apartment house. At the end of the corridor a negro youth lay loosely a-sprawl and snoring on the telephone switchboard, and the elevator door stood open. The sight reassured Clifford on one point: he had beaten Loveman to his home—that is, if Loveman's purpose had been to come home.

Noiselessly, Clifford crossed to the stairway beside the elevator and ran up flight after flight, until he came breathlessly to the twelfth floor, the floor above

Loveman's studio apartment. He let himself through a door with a latch-key, and the next moment, sitting in the darkness, he had on the headpiece of a dictagraph whose wires ran down into the lofty studio which Loveman used as his library. Two or three minutes passed — then he heard some one enter below — then he heard a deep, gruff, unmistakable voice: —

"God, Loveman — thought you were never going to show up."

His conjecture had been correct. There had been planned a prompt conference to follow that night's all-important undertaking.

"Been held up, Bradley, — everything's gone wrong!" Loveman's usual smooth voice was now more like a snarl.

"Gone wrong!" exclaimed Bradley.

"Yes, the whole dam' works!"

"But how the hell, Loveman —"

"I can't explain here," Loveman snappily interrupted. "It's not safe. Clifford's got a dictagraph planted somewhere in this room."

"The hell you say! But how do you know?"

"He quoted something to-night which you and I had said — something which we said when alone in this room."

"Damn him!" growled Bradley. "Why did n't I go ahead, instead of minding you, and have him bumped off when I wanted to!" And then: "Let's look around and rip out his damned machine."

"There's no telling where his wires run. Besides, there's not time. There's a chance that he may be trailing me here —"

"Come on, then," snapped the brusque voice of Bradley. "If he comes up, let's croak him. Leave your door open and we can pull him in here and do the job. Then you can say he got into your flat and you shot him in self-defense, thinking he was a burglar."

Voices ceased; footsteps crossed the room below. Removing the annunciator, Clifford slipped out into the hallway and cautiously peered down the well of the stairway. On Loveman's landing he saw two shadowy, crouching figures, and in the hand of the lawyer he saw a dim something which he knew to be a pistol. Instinctively he drew his automatic and waited.

Five minutes passed — ten minutes. The figures below still maintained their moveless ambuscade. Every moment Clifford expected them to turn their suspicion and their search upwards; in that event, with that pair in their present mood, it would mean bullets to the finish. Clifford did not wish such a turn to the situation, even were he to come out the victor; he wanted to carry this case much further, to have much more direct evidence of the practices of the pair, before the end should come. But he held himself tensely ready.

But his foresight and quick action had saved him an encounter: the pair thought only of the possibil-

ity that Clifford might have followed Loveman, and never that he might have preceded Loveman here. Presently, a low voice ascended to him — Bradley's.

"Guess he's not trailed you, Loveman. Come on, I want the dope on what happened to-night. Clifford can't have your whole joint wired; let's go into your bathroom — he can't have touched that."

They withdrew and a moment later Clifford heard a door close. He slipped down, waited a space at Loveman's door, and then, after a few moments' manipulation with a skeleton key, he noiselessly opened it and softly stepped inside. The hallway was dark, but at one end was an open door from which light streamed. Toward this he slipped with a cat's tread, and peeped in. He saw the bathroom, as large as an ordinary New York bedroom, finished in marble and white-tile, and in it sat little Loveman and the big-chested Bradley.

In a low voice Loveman briefly outlined the fiasco of their careful scheme at Le Minuit. Bradley swore — and Clifford was the chief object of his guttural fury.

"What we goin' to do next?"

"I've done one thing already. I beat it straight to Mary Regan."

"What for?"

"She's too good a thing to lose if we can hold her; so I tried to con her into believing I'd framed her for her own good. But that's not the real reason

— the big reason." Loveman's usually smooth voice was now nervous and tense. "Don't you see the fix she's got me in? She knows enough about me to get me disbarred, if she cared to talk — and perhaps get me a prison sentence on top of it — and perhaps get you sent away, too. So I simply had to have her on our side, if I could get her."

"Well, what did she say?"

"She turned me down cold — said she was through with me."

Again Bradley swore. "Well, if you're afraid of her, why don't you beat her to that big stiff Morton — tell him who she is and what she's done? You can get away with it."

"Telling Morton has got to be my last move. It's too dangerous — I might implicate myself."

"Well, what you going to do?"

"My chief business has got to be Mary Regan," Loveman answered grimly — "fixing her so she can't hurt me, and doing it quick."

"You mean croaking her?"

"That raw stuff don't go with me, Bradley. I'm not so tired that I'm willing to run the risk of sitting in the electric chair up at Sing Sing."

"There's a lot of things besides being croaked that can happen to a woman in this town," said Bradley. "The way that Mrs. Dormer case was worked ain't so bad; it's always good for a repeat. Mysterious disappearance until the danger is over. You can always handle a woman so she'll

have nothing much to say about the time she was missing."

"Too risky."

"How about smearing her? That would help some, if it was done proper."

"I don't know what it's going to be yet — but it's going to be something mighty soon." He spoke with nervous incisiveness. "With you and Hilton and Nan Burdette and Nina Cordova, there'll be plenty of people. Your first job will be to keep Mary Regan covered night and day, so we can act the minute we're ready. I'll have something doped out by morning, and I'll let you know. Come on, let's see if there is n't a cold bottle in the ice-chest."

Clifford stole swiftly and noiselessly out. Fifteen minutes later he was calling his name through Mary Regan's door; and after a ten minutes' wait he was in her presence. During those minutes he had done much thinking.

"Do you still control the lease to the apartment you had in the Mordona?" he asked quietly.

She was bewildered. "Yes. Jack and I took it until the first of October. Why?"

"Then you still have a key to the apartment?"

"Yes."

"How much baggage do you have here? Not much, I hope."

"A steamer trunk, and a bag."

"Pack them. In half an hour you move back to the Mordona."

"Back to the Mordona!" she exclaimed. "What for?"

He told her something of the formless danger in which she stood. "To be safe for the present, you've got to be where no one will find you. And the Mordona is about the last place any one will look for you. I'll get a car from Headquarters to move you, and you'll leave no trail from here."

There was rapid packing — a silent carrying-down of baggage — a ride through the night in a car that could be traced from no taxi station — and Mary Regan was once more in the apartment in the Mordona, where, months before, her glowing dream had changed to a sober, patient, cautious struggle to re-make Jack Morton into a man.

CHAPTER XXV

A FATHER'S HOPE

THE next day the first open move in this struggle was made — a minor development, perhaps signifying no more in the unfolding of events than their delay. Clifford learned of it when he dropped into the Grand Alcazar the following evening on the chance of finding Uncle George.

"Hello, son — sit in with me on a little drink of this here wine drowned in seltzer," said the old man. And when Clifford was seated, he drawled on, a solemn eye on his glass. "Son, I've been tapering fast toward prohibition. In another month I'll be a bone-dry state. But I'm such a weak creature of habit, son, that I know I'll just keep on tapering. I'm a worried man, and here's what's worrying me: after I've reached water, and am still tapering, what am I going to drink next? What's the answer? I tell you what, son, it's an awful problem I got to face single-handed and single-livered and all alone in the world — this getting good so sudden and so fast that I can't stop myself. Why, man, when I hit heaven, I'm afraid I'll have up so much speed that I'll shoot clean through."

Clifford made no response; he knew none was expected. He gave solemn gaze for solemn gaze.

Then Uncle George permitted his bald left eyelid to droop in a slight wink.

"Son, I been doing a little private blood-hounding — in my own special delicate motor-truck fashion. The czar and the little czarovitch have fled from the capital to Siberia."

"Meaning who?"

"Meaning Mr. Morton and one freshly recovered son."

Clifford was at once interested. "You talked with them?"

"Yes. Over at the Biltmore. The father don't suspect how good I am — therefore he does n't mind chinning with me a bit when we meet."

"Where are they going? — what are they going to do? Did he tell you?"

"Son, my intellect may not be what it once was, but a gentleman does n't have to tell me anything for me to know what he's going to do. We talked baseball; I was willing to put two bits on the Giants to win the pennant next season — from which I learned that Mr. Morton was going to beat it far from the night-blooming anemone of Broadway and the tender folk-songs of the cabarets— and that he was going to give his only offspring the advantage of his direct, undivided, and unsleeping personal attention."

Clifford nodded. This fitted in with Mr. Morton's determination announced the night before in front of Le Minuit when he had refused Mary's offer —

his cool decision that he was now going to handle Jack. Well, he was a master at directing men, at bending them to his will; now that he had set himself to the task, perhaps he might also really manage Jack.

Though Mr. Morton was out of the city, Clifford privately kept watch on Mary, half expecting that her pride and her temperish self-confidence would get the better of her caution and impel her into that vaguely hinted action against Jack's father. He tried to think out what course might be brewing in her mind. He remembered that Mr. Morton, ignorant of her true relationship to Jack, had tried to make love to her — the passing love of a worldly man; and he knew that Mary was capable of playing any part. She might, in her desire to even matters with Mr. Morton, and reckless of herself and her own name, lead him on, always eluding him, until — well, there was no guessing what Mary, bitter and reckless, might attempt. But whatever she might try, she would carry through.

Also — with the help of Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly, and the confidential aid of Commissioner Thorne — he privately watched Bradley and Loveman, alert for signs of attempt to carry out their self-protecting scheme against Mary. But Mary's hiding was a temporary check alike to herself and the two men, and the next development in this complicated human drama was to have its inception in another quarter.

Uneventful weeks passed; spring grew into sum-

mer; and then one evening Clifford was surprised with a message from Mr. Morton asking him to call at once at the Biltmore. Clifford went to the Biltmore, wondering what lay behind this unexpected summons. Mr. Morton admitted him to his sitting-room and asked him to be seated.

There was a litter of mail upon the table — evidently an accumulation of correspondence that had not been forwarded. As Clifford sat down his eyes were caught and sharply arrested by an open letter. He recognized the writing — it was Mary's; and almost before he knew what he was doing he had read this fragment: —

I have been thinking your suggestion all over — and possibly, *possibly*, if it were repeated —

Mr. Morton, who had followed Clifford's eyes, reached sharply forward, and snatched up the letter.

"Pardon my seeing it — I could n't help it," said Clifford. And then: "I remember you offered to take the writer of that letter on a very private cruise. I suppose she has now consented?"

"That's none of your business!" snapped Mr. Morton, pocketing the letter.

So, then, Mary did have some plan under way!

"Mr. Clifford," Mr. Morton said abruptly, then paused. Clifford now perceived that the usually composed and masterful financier was in a state of nerves which he was trying his utmost to control. "Mr. Clifford, some time ago I asked you to help me

with my son. I have sent for you to ask you that again."

"Help you!" Clifford wanted a bit of information on a certain point, so he pretended a greater ignorance than was actually his. "Why, I supposed you had taken Jack off, braced him up, and brought about the marriage you once told me was your chief desire for Jack — to Miss Maisie Jones. I supposed Jack and she were on their honeymoon."

"That affair is all off," the father said briefly.

"What! Definitely?"

"Her aunt wrote saying that Maisie no longer cared for Jack. I wrote to Maisie, and she confirmed it. She was unchangeable."

So, then, Maisie Jones had fulfilled her promise to Mary.

"To repeat," Mr. Morton went on, "I have sent for you to ask you again to help me with Jack."

"My answer now must be the same as when you asked help of me before: I can't say until I know the situation. And even then I must reserve the privilege to act as I think best."

"All right. Have it your own way."

"First, tell me what has happened since you took charge of Jack that night at Le Minuit?"

"I took him to a mountain hotel in Maine, hoping that away from all his old associates I could manage him more easily. But he kept me awake night and day, and even then he was always eluding me and finding road-houses where the prohibition law did n't

exist. Yesterday he got away altogether. I know he's somewhere in New York. I want you to help me find him."

"I thought you had Mr. Bradley retained for such service."

"I have, and I've already notified him. But I don't trust Mr. Bradley as far as I once did. That's why I'm asking you to help. Will you?"

Clifford felt the irony of it — that he should once more be called in to save the man Mary Regan had married instead of himself. But he nodded.

"That may be easy enough if Jack is in any of the regular joy-joints. But it will be hard if any of the sharps have got him in tow. Come on."

Leading the way, Clifford began a careful search of the gayer restaurants of Broadway. He picked up Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly. The search was rapid, for it had not to go beyond the entrances; Clifford knew the door-men and managers of every resort, and Jack Morton was a well-known figure to all. To them Clifford put the same question — "Young Mr. Morton in here?" — and all answered honestly, having a very substantial fear of Clifford and Jimmie Kelly, and an earnest desire to retain their licenses.

At length, toward one o'clock, they came to Le Minuit; and of the proprietor, Monsieur Le Bain, Clifford asked the usual question. Monsieur Le Bain replied that Jack was there, and led the way through the din of his "authentic Hawaiian orchestra" and the hilarity of his hundreds of pleasure-fevered

guests, down a little corridor off his "imperial ballroom." He started to open the door at the end of this little hallway, — the door to his most exclusive private room, — but Clifford checked his hand.

"Need n't bother, Le Bain, — you can go on back," said Clifford. "And, Jimmie," — to the little lieutenant, as Le Bain went gliding away, — "I wish you'd hang around, where you won't be noticed much, so you'll be handy if needed."

"All right, Bob," returned Lieutenant Jimmie.

Clifford opened the door and pressed the elder Morton ahead of him into a dining-room of gray-and-gold. What he saw was almost the same as he had seen in Le Minuit many weeks before: here were Nina Cordova, Nan Burdette, Hilton, and Jack — the only difference being that Jack, then in a stupor, was now joyously maudlin.

"Why, h'lo, dad," he said, swaying up, a handsome, flushed, boyish figure. "Welcome home! Pull up chair, have li'l' ole drink, 'n' meet m' frien's. 'N' there's Clifford — good ole scout Clifford — meet m' frien's. Everybody have 'nother li'l' ole drink."

The other three had risen. "I'll take it as a favor if you'll all say good-night," Mr. Morton said shortly. "I want to speak to my son."

"So do we," returned Nina Cordova in her most pertly charming manner, which she figured as irresistible. "Jack invited us to his little party, and we're not going to insult the dear boy by walking out on him."

"Get out — all of you!" Mr. Morton's jaws snapped together.

"See here, we don't stand for that line of talk, and we're not going," bristled Hilton.

Clifford caught Hilton by the wrist, and gave the arm a twist that made the man drop sidewise to one knee and groan. "You are all going, and, Hilton, you go first," — and he thrust him through the door. He turned to Nan Burdette, and the star of the long-faded "Orange Blossoms." "If you two want to avoid trouble," he said shortly, "you'll follow Mr. Hilton right out."

They glowered at Clifford, but started to obey. "See here," hiccoughed young Morton, "'f my frien's go, I go too," — and he swayed toward the door.

But Clifford sharply closed the door upon the pair, blocked Jack's way, and laid a detaining hand upon Jack's shoulder. "Stay with me, Jack," he said, "and we'll have that little old drink together."

"Don' wan' drink with you. Goin' with m' frien's."

A stubborn, vicious look had come into Jack's face, a look that Clifford knew meant trouble. "Just one little old drink, Jack, and then you can go with your friends."

Jack regarded Clifford's impeding figure, and grinned cunningly. "All ri' — jus' one drink."

"He's already had too damned much," growled the elder Morton.

Clifford gave the father an imperative, knowing look, pushed Jack down into his chair, and pressed a button. "Send Monsieur Le Bain," he said to the answering waiter; and to Jack: "I'm going to order the drinks, Jack, and we're going to switch to high-balls — and we're going to see if this dump has some Scotch that's really Scotch."

As Le Bain appeared, Clifford stepped quickly to the door, spoke in a low voice, and returned to the table. Presently Le Bain himself entered with three glasses which he set down in careful order before the men, and then withdrew.

"Here's how," said Clifford, and sipped his glass. Jack tossed his down and rose unsteadily.

"Now, guess I'll go find m' frien's," he declared.

"Not yet, Jack," — and Clifford pushed him again back into place. "There's going to be one more round, and it's on you. I gave Le Bain the order."

Mr. Morton, not touching his glass, sharply watched the two. Jack grinned cunningly at Clifford; then his face became vacuous, heavy; and then he slumped forward, and head and shoulders lay inertly among the wine-glasses and the dishes of the interrupted supper.

"What's happened to him?" the father asked sharply.

"Doped."

"Doped? What for?"

"Did n't you see there was no handling him in the mood he was in? Le Bain keeps his own knock-out drops for use on customers who become obstreperous — and I ordered him to fix Jack's drink. The dose is light — it won't hurt him." Clifford abruptly changed the subject. "Well, you've got Jack. What are you going to do with him?"

Mr. Morton did not answer; his proud, powerful face, now pale, was fixed upon his son. Clifford also shifted his gaze to the huddled figure. Despite everything, Clifford really liked this good-natured piece of driftwood which washed so irresponsibly upon this great tide of pleasure. But what he felt most strongly at this moment was the ironical caprice of Destiny, which had enlarged so minor and will-less a figure, a mere pawn in this big human game, into so all-important a factor in Mary Regan's life, and his own — and in the designs of many persons.

Clifford turned to the father. "Well — what next?" he prompted.

"I wish to God I knew!" Mr. Morton burst out, his reserve suddenly leaving him. "See what he's come to! See what he's done to himself!"

"He did n't do it — at least not all," Clifford said quietly.

"Who did, then?"

"Several persons — but chiefly his father."

"His father!" An angry flush tinted the older man's cheeks.

"Jack was not unusually bad or weak, and he was naturally most likable. He would have turned out well enough if his father had trained him right from the start and placed a man's responsibilities —"

"I don't want to hear any damned sermon!" the other interrupted. "What's done, is done! I've got to face the present. I've done all I can to save him — and I've failed!"

He paused, then went on in savage desperation. "And if anything is going to be done, it's got to be done quick! I've controlled him, to an extent, by controlling his money. But a fool aunt of his died the other day, and left him a legacy of two hundred thousand which automatically becomes his on his twenty-fifth birthday — and he'll be twenty-five in a month. If he's not got hold of before he gets that money, then the last chance is gone!"

He was silent a moment. Then came another burst, even more desperate.

"God, can't you see what it means to me? — my only son! — all the plans I've built on him! — and him come to this! For God's sake, is n't there anything that can be done to save him!"

Clifford regarded him steadily. But there had suddenly begun a wild pounding of his heart.

"There is just one thing that might possibly save your son."

"What's that?" the other cried quickly.

Clifford hesitated, while the struggle which had so swiftly arisen within himself fought itself out.

In spite of all that had happened, a dream had persisted in him. If he spoke the thought that was in his mind, and if that suggestion were accepted and carried to a successful conclusion, it would mean the end, forever, of this persistent dream. . . .

And yet — there was that plan and purpose that had guided his attitude toward Mary Regan these many months: that Mary should be allowed to play her hand out — that Life should test her.

And then, in a flash, he was seeing again the letter he had glimpsed when he had entered Mr. Morton's room at the Biltmore — that letter with its unmistakable intimation. A flame of anger went searingly through him. Well, given into his hands was a method of putting Mary to the uttermost test — of proving who and what she was: and a method of bringing this whole matter to a head — for Mary — for everybody.

"What is it, man?" Mr. Morton repeated.

"You would n't pay the price," said Clifford.

"If I could get results I'd pay any price!"

"I'm not so sure you would, but I'll try you." Clifford stepped to the little wall telephone, done in gray-and-gold to match the room, and asked for Mary's number at the Mordona. After a long wait Mary's voice sounded on the wire.

"This is Clifford," he said. "I want to see you at once at Le Minuit — very important. Ask Le Bain to show you where I am. . . . All right."

"Who is the party?" demanded Mr. Morton when Clifford had hung up.

"I think it best for you not to know until the party comes," replied Clifford. "The party should be here in half an hour."

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW MARY'S DREAM CAME TRUE

A TINY dressing-room opened off this very private supper-room, and into this they moved Jack and drew the curtains. Then the two men sat down and in a silence which had as its background the laughter and the wild, harsh dance music without, they smoked for half an hour — Clifford wondering how this pale, grim man was going to bear himself, and how, and as what, Mary would emerge from the double situation toward which she was hurrying.

Presently there was a knock. "That's our party," said Clifford, and crossed and opened the door.

But instead of Mary, there entered Bradley and behind him little Peter Loveman. Both halted in seeming surprise. Instinctively Clifford knew that Hilton had sent quick warning to the pair.

"Been on the track of your son, Mr. Morton," explained Bradley; "and we just trailed him here. Was going to shoot you word we'd located him."

"You're right on the job," Morton said curtly. "But since I have him in hand, I guess I won't need you gentlemen. Good-night."

Loveman stepped quickly forward; Clifford could guess the nervous fear that prompted the keen-witted little man to want to be at hand in what he

sensed as a moment of peril to himself and the delicately balanced edifice of his schemes.

"Pardon me, Mr. Morton," he said firmly, in a voice of sympathetic concern, "but I'm sure we might be of some service, and should remain."

"I'm giving orders here," snapped Mr. Morton. "Good-night!"

They stood a moment, Morton's cold gray eyes commandingly fixed on them; then they backed toward the door. Clifford thought rapidly: These two, leaving here, might stumble across Mary Regan, so long searched for by them, and prepared as he knew they always were to act on the instant of discovery, they might somehow manage to put their daring plan, whatever it might be, into instant execution. That risk must be avoided.

"Wait!" Clifford called sharply to them. "Mr. Morton, I prefer to have them remain."

Mr. Morton stared. "Just as you like."

"Loveman, Bradley, your request is granted," said Clifford.

And then a further possibility flashed upon Clifford. Since Hilton had communicated with Loveman and Bradley, what more likely than that they should still be able to communicate? — which would mean that Hilton was close at hand on the lookout. And if that were true, what more likely than that when Mary drove up —

Before this thought had completed itself Clifford had started out. But even as he laid hand upon the

knob there was a knock. He swung open the door, and Mary, a light summer cloak thrown loosely about her shoulders, stepped into the room.

"I'm here — what is it?" she said as she entered.

"Miss Gilmore!" exclaimed Mr. Morton, using the name by which he had best known her.

She glanced swiftly and keenly from one to the other of the three unexpected men. Then she wheeled upon Clifford.

"What's this you've led me into?" she demanded — "a plant?"

"Bradley and Loveman are uninvited, and were not here when I telephoned," he explained. Then he went on in a quiet, dominating, driving voice. "I did n't tell you whom you were really to meet, and I did n't tell Mr. Morton who was coming, for the reason that I felt you might each refuse to see the other. Pardon my subterfuge. But I sent for you, Miss Gilmore, because Mr. Morton wished to talk to you about Jack."

Mr. Morton flushed wrathfully. "I talk to her about Jack! After the letter I've had from her!"

"You'll forget that letter!" Clifford said sharply. "You put this affair in my hands — and your chief concern is Jack."

He turned to Mary, and looked at her squarely, meaningly.

"*You've* had your dreams — big dreams. I don't need to remind you what they are. And you've worked to have those dreams come true."

He turned back on Morton, and spoke in the same dominating voice. "And *you*, Mr. Morton — I told you a little while ago that there was just one thing that might save Jack. Miss Gilmore here is the only person who has in recent years had any influence on Jack. For a time she had him working and behaving. You recall her offer that night to take Jack back to that Riverside Drive apartment and make a man of him. You turned her offer down — you said you could manage your son — and you've seen the result." He spoke more dominantly, more drivingly. "That was your big chance. No matter what you may think of Miss Gilmore, she is still your big chance, and your only chance."

Clifford paused and waited. Mary, very pale, gazed at him, her lips apart. Morton, his proud, masterful face also pale, stared fixedly at Mary, but said nothing.

"Well," Clifford prompted him sharply, "here's your last chance. Speak up."

"First of all," said Mr. Morton, his voice steady with an obviously great effort and his gray eyes now piercing, "I'd like to ask Miss Gilmore a few questions. Miss Gilmore, how did you and Jack —"

"One moment!" cut in Peter Loveman, stepping quickly between Mary and Mr. Morton, and seizing the latter's arm. Clifford had seen a quick fear leap into the little man's face, and he knew the little lawyer's impulse was to be first at the explaining and save himself if possible. "I can answer what I

know to be your questions," Loveman said rapidly. "That's one reason I wanted to hunt you up tonight with Mr. Bradley, because I've just learned some things."

"Loveman!" snapped Clifford, swiftly drawing his automatic and aiming it over Mary's shoulder. The little lawyer turned, and all the color left the face, ruddied by high living. "Loveman, Miss Gilmore and Mr. Morton have the floor!"

Loveman, dropping Morton's arm, stepped from between the two. Mary had not seen what argument had brought about the lawyer's subsidence; her eyes, which had shifted to Mr. Morton, had remained steadily upon him, waiting.

"Mr. Morton, you have the floor," Clifford prompted him.

Mr. Morton seemed to swallow something — something so large that it would hardly go down. Then he spoke.

"Miss Gilmore, I've done all I can to save Jack — but I've failed. The Broadway life seems to have got him at last. Here is what he seems to have come to." He drew apart the curtains of the little dressing-room, revealing the huddled form of Jack, and then let the curtains swing together. "As Mr. Clifford has said, I see that there is only one chance left, and that you are the only chance. Will you be willing to undertake what you offered to do that night down in front of this café?"

The moment of Mary's great test — her great

opportunity, if she saw it as such — had arrived. Clifford watched her — waiting — his whole being taut. Her face had become a mask; she looked with cold, direct eyes upon the man on the adroit winning of whose favor she had for months striven to build her great worldly dreams.

"I suppose you mean undertake it on the conditions that were then mentioned," she said quietly — "that it is to be what you once termed the 'usual Riverside Drive affair'? That we are to be Mr. and Mrs. Grayson?"

"Of course, I'll make it worth your while."

"No, thank you," she said quietly.

"But I will give you any present allowance you may desire," he urged, "and will make any permanent settlement upon you that is in reason."

"I do not care to run —"

"But, Mary — Miss Gilmore," gently interrupted Loveman. This affair was taking an amazingly different turn from what he had expected. After all, bewildering as it was, matters were falling out in a way to make his original plan seem once more possible. "Mr. Morton's offer is fair. Take it."

Mary did not heed him, but spoke directly at Mr. Morton. "I do not care to undertake to conduct a sanitarium for one person for pay — and then have the patient removed as soon as a cure is effected."

"But if you were willing to do it before, why not now? I don't understand!"

"It is no concern of mine if you do not understand."

She spoke calmly, coldly. Clifford's eyes were fixed upon her, trying to pierce her brain and heart. Morton stared at her discomfited, desperation growing in his face. There was another moment of silence, against the background of the dance music which twanged stridently without.

Mary spoke again. "If that completes what you wish to say to me, Mr. Morton, then good-night."

She turned to leave. Her hand was on the knob, when Morton spoke up, his voice now husky.

"Another minute, Miss Gilmore!" She turned about. "Miss Gilmore, you are my last chance — and Jack's last chance." He spoke more rapidly. "I've simply got to have you — you understand. You must have had some real kind of attachment for Jack or you'd never have offered what you did. And certainly Jack likes you or you'd never have had the influence over him that you've proved you possess. Listen — let's consider it all from another angle. Miss Gilmore, when you were at the Grantham as 'Mrs. Gardner' you told me you had a husband — but excuse me, I do not believe it. Miss Gilmore" — he halted, there was a super-gulp, then he went on — "Miss Gilmore, if you are free, I want you to marry Jack."

Clifford, Loveman, and Bradley, equally astounded, gazed at Mary. She seemed to be able only to stare at Mr. Morton.

"Whatever I may have said or thought against you, I'll say this in your favor," Mr. Morton continued, rapidly as before — "that you were so discreet in your affair with Jack, you kept it all so secret, that I'm sure there will be no scandal. We'll not have that to face. So I ask you, as a favor, to marry him."

Clifford, still dazed by the swift manner in which his plan had leaped beyond itself, breathlessly held his gaze on Mary. Her dark eyes were wild, her lips loosely parted — the figure of one bewildered beyond realization of what had happened. Then she caught a sharp breath and high excitement came into her face. At that same instant Clifford saw the magnitude of what had suddenly been opened to her — and he saw that she was seeing it, too. At last, by a strange twist of circumstances and of Clifford's attempt to guide events, she had *won!* Won all that was included in her original plan! And most amazing of all, what she had thought to get as the reward of scheming, she was now being begged to accept as a favor — wealth, worldly position, and all that each could bring!

And Clifford, in this high moment, realized another thing. All these months of her big dreams, of her indomitable and skillful scheming, she had had one great, ever-present fear — that some one might expose her identity and her past, and bring to instant nothingness her magnificent dreams. How she had fought exposure — desperately and daringly,

with her all of cleverness! And now, if she were only moderately careful, she need no longer fear exposure — and when exposure came, if it did, she would have so established herself that it could no longer injure her.

Events, Clifford's efforts, the working-out of conflicting human impulses, the operations of that erratic thing which we call chance or fate or destiny — all these could not have combined more perfectly to be her friend — could not have combined better to bring her the worldly substance of her daring dreams.

"You'll do it, won't you?" prompted Mr. Morton.

Mary did not speak at once. She was even more pale than before; she was breathing rapidly, almost panting, and her eyes were even more staringly wide. Clifford, his heart pounding, wondered at her prolonged silence — wondered feverishly just what was passing in that bold, daring, worldly mind, which he had found to be so many different minds.

She turned and gave Clifford a long, direct look — a bewildered, almost startled look. Then she sharply caught her breath, and slowly wheeling she moved a step nearer Mr. Morton.

"Mr. Morton," she began in a low, strained voice, "I want to tell you something — I want to tell you everything —"

"Stop!" came a frantic cry from Loveman — and Clifford again saw fear in Loveman's large, protuberant eyes.

In an instant what had been a bewildered tableau became a whirl of activity. Bradley's right hand darted for the electric-light switch, and before Clifford could move there was a click and the room was in darkness. A shrill two notes, which Clifford knew to be a signal, sounded from Bradley's lips. Clifford sprang toward where he had last seen Bradley, and collided with that burly figure with so great an impact that both went crashing to the floor, Clifford on top.

Clifford had not drawn his automatic; he wanted no shooting affray — not in this darkness where bullets would be impartial and irresponsible. But instinct told him Bradley's probable first tactic; and he reached for Bradley's right hand, and fortunately caught the wrist. Sure enough, the right hand was jerking out a heavy pistol. With both hands Clifford seized the weapon, and tried to twist it from the other's hand; and grunting, twisting, the two old enemies fought in the darkness.

Clifford heard the door open and sharply close, heard Mary cry out — and then heard another struggle, with Mary gasping. He gave a desperate wrench, and the pistol was his: he did not then know that his comparatively easy victory over the powerful Bradley was over a half-dazed man — that his catapultic leap had driven the falling Bradley's head against the corner of the table. Raising the pistol, held club-wise, Clifford twice struck at where Bradley's head should be. At the second blow

Bradley's grappling arms relaxed, and he was suddenly limp.

Clifford sprang to his feet, fumbled for the switch, found it, and turned it on. Out of the blackness there leaped before Clifford's eyes the other struggle, Mary Regan its center, her cloak torn loose and slipping from one shoulder. Loveman was gripping her left arm, and Hilton had her struggling right arm in a twisting clutch. A tiny bright something flashed in Hilton's right hand and made a stab at the white arm he held.

But even as this picture was revealed, Clifford sprang toward Hilton; while Mr. Morton blinking from the darkness, started, bewildered, toward the two. "Look out!" warningly cried Loveman — but too late, for as the bright fang touched Mary's arm, Clifford's fist caught Hilton under the jaw. Hilton, fairly lifted from his feet, went spinning and fell in a loose heap. Clifford whirled upon Loveman, but Loveman was backing away, a pasty smile on his full face, and his hands held up.

"I'm not doing a thing, Bob," gasped the little man — "honest, not a thing!"

"Better keep on doing it!" said Clifford, and blew his whistle.

"What's — what's happened?" panted Mary.

"Nothing — except some parties have just tried to kidnap you, first trying to shoot a hypo into you."

"Kidnap me! What for?"

"To shut you up — get you out of the way — later, to frame you to suit their own purpose. But you're bleeding!" Clifford whipped out a handkerchief and bound the arm. Then he picked up from the floor the syringe that had fallen from Hilton's hand and examined it. "It's still loaded, so you got nothing more than a scratch of the needle."

At this moment Jimmie Kelly entered, answering Clifford's whistle. With Jimmie's help Clifford put handcuffs first upon Loveman and then upon Hilton and Bradley, who had both begun to revive.

"For the present, we'll line 'em up against the wall," said Clifford — which they did. "Later we can decide what to do with them."

"But what's all this about?" demanded Mr. Morton.

"Explanations can wait until later," returned Clifford. "The first thing is your business with Miss Gilmore. Miss Gilmore, I believe you started to tell us something."

Once more Clifford looked at Mary keenly — back again in that mood of palpitant suspense as to what lay in her heart — as to what she was about to say and do — she who this moment held her dream-world in her hands! Morton, silent, awaited her speech. From the wall Loveman, Bradley, and Hilton looked on in varying degrees of fear, chagrin, and glowering wrath.

When at length Mary spoke, she spoke quietly. "The first thing I wish to tell you, Mr. Morton, is

comparatively of no importance. I wrote you that letter, yes. That was weeks ago. I wrote it the very night you refused to entrust Jack to me. I was angry. I was determined you should suffer, too. I was going to lead you on — get you caught in a predicament that would make you writhe — and then would come public humiliation."

"What kind of a predicament?" asked Mr. Morton.

"It does n't matter now. But I had my plan — and I think I could have made it work. You got only that one letter, Mr. Morton. That was because, when I calmed down, I changed my mind. I did not want to do what I had planned to do."

Somehow — though Mary Regan could mean nothing in his life — this statement brought great relief to Clifford.

She went on in the same quiet voice. "The rest of what I have to tell you is of more importance. My name is not Miss Gilmore nor Mrs. Gardner, and never was. My name is Mary Regan. My father was 'Gentleman Jim' Regan, a confidence-man; I've helped my Uncle Joe Russell, another confidence-man. I've been something of a confidence-woman, a crook, in the past. Now I'm what you'd probably call an adventuress."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Morton.

Clifford blinked at her, hardly believing what he was hearing. She had feared exposure — she had fought to ward it off — and now that she had won

all that she had ever dreamed of winning, here she was quietly exposing herself!

"I met your son," she went on. "I saw the chance to get something I wanted through marrying him. So I married him."

"What — you are already married to Jack!" ejaculated Mr. Morton. "Why — why —"

"It does n't sound believable, I know. You once called the engagement and wedding rings fakes, which I wore as Mrs. Grayson. I have them with me." From a bag which hung from her wrist she took two rings and handed them to him. "You may look at them. They are both engraved."

He glanced at the engraving within the golden circles.

"Married!" he repeated.

"I have been your daughter-in-law all the time you believed me Jack's mistress. I made him keep the marriage secret. Jack knows nothing about who I really am. If the marriage became public there was the danger of you and Jack learning I was Mary Regan; I did n't want this to become known until I had made myself indispensable, and then you'd have to accept me. That's why I tried to make Jack settle down and go to work. It was all part of my game."

"So — you're a crook!" breathed Morton, dumbfounded.

She went on in her even, controlled voice. "Also it was part of my game to break off the affair be-

tween Jack and Maisie Jones — you remember that time at the Grantham."

"What — you were behind Maisie Jones's action!"

"I told her that I was married to Jack, and that we had to keep the marriage secret. And so she wrote you, breaking the engagement. She did that to help Jack — and help me; she did n't know me, did n't understand me, therefore she overestimated me and believed I could make a strong man out of Jack and could make him happy. For that part of what I did, even though it was trickery, I am glad. Maisie Jones is too good for Jack; he would have broken her heart. I saved her from life-long misery."

Mr. Morton stared. And then: "But why have you told me all these things now? — when you had succeeded in your plan?"

"Because I see things differently now," replied the same quiet voice. "Jack — he was attractive, and I liked him — but I never really loved him. I am sick of the things I tried to do, sick of the things I dreamed of. You may have Jack's freedom any way you like. I'm through with it all." She repeated the last sentence, still quietly, but vibrantly. "I'm through with it all!"

In Clifford there was wild exultation — a thrilling sense of triumph, too new as yet for him to think of its possible relation to himself. He had tried to influence her by influencing the events which touched her life — but never had he foreseen just such a *dénouement* of events, just such a *dénouement*

of character. He had been right all the while, as to the fundamental worth of her nature!

Morton stared at the pale, composed face of his daughter-in-law, which gazed with such steadiness into his own. He was utterly without words for a few seconds. Then he burst out: —

"Even if all of what you have said is true," he cried desperately, "you are nevertheless the one person who can save Jack. We'll overlook what you've been and what you've done. You're Jack's wife. Well, you've got to stand by him!"

"I'm through with it all," she said once more.

Morton's desperate, suppliant manner changed. Once again he was the keen, powerful personality that made him master of men and things.

"You can't slide out of it like that, Mary Morton, — to give you your right name for once," he drove at her grimly. "Something seems to have awakened you — awakened you to what you regard as a real sense of honor. Well, here is something for this new sense of honor to consider: Whatever your motive was in marrying Jack, in marrying him you have incurred a definite obligation. It's your duty, unless you want to be a quitter, and more of a crook than you were before, to fulfill that obligation!"

She looked at him fixedly — for a long time. Then she slowly looked around at Clifford — then she looked back again, and her figure tensed. For a long time no one spoke.

"It's an obligation you have incurred!" Mr.

Morton drove at her. "It's your duty to fulfill it!"

"My duty!" Her eyes grew wide, and she shivered. Her wide eyes remained fastened in their sickly stare upon Mr. Morton's grim mandatory face; she was thinking, weighing the wide alternatives of life; influenced perhaps by the new point Mr. Morton had made, but not influenced by his attempted dominance.

"My duty!" she breathed again. Then the life seemed to flow out of her. Her straight, slender body drooped and swayed, but a hand clutching the back of a gilt chair held her up. "Very well," she said in a thin dry whisper. And then: "Very well — if you'll let me tell Jack all I've told you, and if Jack then still wants me."

"You must n't tell him!" cried Mr. Morton sharply. "Even *your* hold on him is precarious. Telling him might ruin everything. Why, I guess you'd better not even let him know that I know. Take him back to the Mordona — be Mr. and Mrs. Grayson for the present — pretend to be working toward a reconciliation with me. Keep everything a secret until Jack is established."

She smiled. The irony of it! How circumstances had reversed their positions: here was Mr. Morton urging almost the same arguments for secrecy that she had formerly used upon herself!

It had been a very little smile. She was instantly sober.

"Very well — I'll keep it secret and I'll do what I can," she said.

Clifford gazed at her heavily, a great, numb pain where his heart was. Then he slowly turned to Lieutenant Kelly.

"Let 'em all go, Jimmie," he said briefly. "A pinch means publicity, and publicity is just what this situation does n't require."

Jimmie removed the handcuffs and the three went out, Bradley glowering vengeance as he passed. "There'll be a next time, you bet!" he growled. Clifford made no reply.

"Mr. Morton, you go next," Clifford said brusquely. "You should n't be found here by Jack when he comes to — which may be any minute. Mrs. Morton can take care of Jack. I'll follow you as soon as I've had a word with her."

A moment later Clifford was alone with Mary. He tried to keep his voice steady, but it did not altogether obey him.

"I merely wanted to say that Bradley, Loveman, and the others may not be satisfied. You exposed yourself completely, but you exposed no one else. You let them off easy, but they may be afraid of you. What they tried to-night they may try again. I wanted to ask you to be careful."

"I will be," she said.

"And I wanted to say that I hope everything is going to work out for the best for you. For you know" — he ended lamely, not very sure of what

he was saying — "I really have wanted to be your friend."

"I know you really have been my friend," she answered — "my best friend. And I thank you."

"Good-night," he said.

"Good-night," she answered, in her face a drawn, gray look.

For a moment he seemed unable to stir; then, "Good-night," he repeated, and left her, gray-faced, and standing rigidly upright in the midst of the débris of the evening's carousal — to wait the awakening of Jack.

Out on the sidewalk Clifford turned into a shadowy doorway; he was going to keep watch, and from a distance see Mary safely to the Mordona. Presently he was aware that Loveman was at his side, smiling his amiable smile.

"Clever work, Bob," Loveman said pleasantly. "Now that it's all finished up, I suppose you are satisfied with the game you've played."

"I'll not be satisfied till I really land you, Loveman."

"No?" said Loveman, very softly. "Perhaps — who knows? — the game may really not all be finished up — for human nature, you know, is human nature — and perhaps there are several other cards to be played — several extremely good cards."

With that the little lawyer moved away. Patiently, with heaviness upon his heart, Clifford stood motionless on guard in the doorway waiting for

Mary to appear with her charge . . . wondering now over Loveman's soft remark about cards yet to be played . . . now wondering about that gray, drawn look with which Mary had followed him out. . . .

CHAPTER XXVII

JACK MAKES A RESOLUTION

FOR an hour — two hours — Clifford continued to stand in the shadowy doorway near the entrance of the Midnight Café. Presently Mary came down, Jack with her. The light drug which Clifford had slipped into his drink to render him more manageable and prevent his going with his carousing companions, had spent its power. Jack was now sober, though plainly his nerves were still badly shaken.

Clifford stepped out of his doorway. He wanted Mary to see him, that she might have the reassurance which would come of her knowing that he was keeping his promise to watch over her and Jack — to ward off any possible attempt of Loveman and Bradley — until she got Jack safely in the apartment at the Mordona, which, months since, they had occupied as "Mr. and Mrs. Grayson" and which they were again to occupy under that name. Mary saw him; but Jack also saw him, which last Clifford had not wished for.

"Hello, there, Bob, — come here," Jack called. Clifford crossed to him, and the young man gripped his hand in a hand that twitched. "Bob, old man," he went on, his unsteady voice full of feeling, "I

want to thank you. You did me a great turn — and, old man, I'm never going to forget it. Mary told me how you got rid of dad, and then sent for her to take me in charge. It was great."

Clifford did not look at Mary, but he was conscious of her pale, set face. He fell in with the apocryphal version Mary apparently had given Jack of what had happened while he had lain in a stupor.

"That's all right, Jack," Clifford replied.

"And say, Bob, I want you to know that I know I've been a fool — and things a lot worse than that. But, Bob, — that's all past now — and past forever! I don't deserve what Mary is doing for me. But I'm going to make good. I'm going to be a good boy — for Mary's sake! Just you watch me!"

There was a frank manliness in the young fellow's voice and manner. He was deeply moved, and was as much in earnest as it lay within his powers to be.

"Here's something I wish you'd back me up in, Bob," Jack went on. "I want to tell dad that Mary and I are married; but she objects. Don't you think I should?"

Clifford, remembering that scene two hours back where Mary had told the older Morton everything while Jack lay unconscious, shook his head. "I think she's right, Jack."

"Well, I'm going to tell soon, no matter what the two of you say!" He gripped Clifford's hand anew. "Thanks once more, old man. And remember, I'm sure going to make good!"

They stepped into a taxi-cab. All this while Mary had neither spoken nor looked at Clifford, and she did not look at him now. But Clifford saw that her face was still gray, still drawn.

He followed at a distance in another taxi-cab, on the watch for interruption from Loveman or Bradley, or their agents. But there was none; and Jack and Mary passed out of sight into the Mordona.

For a space Clifford gazed after them, thinking. Again he had a profound sense that Jack was fundamentally a fine fellow; that what was chiefly wrong with him was that he had been swept into the resistless current of Big Pleasure — and that also he had been victimized by those who make a subtle business of playing upon the human weaknesses of those whom Big Pleasure sucks in — and that also, before and behind it all, he had never been properly guided by his worldly, masterful father. Clifford wondered whether this frank admission of faults, this declaration to make good, was merely a flare, merely the final spurt, of excellent qualities that were almost spent — or whether this was in truth the beginning of a splendid Jack Morton that was yet to be.

The latter seemed to be the case. Two days later Clifford chanced upon Mr. Morton at the Biltmore. "Jack came back to work this morning," commenced the financier, "and he's behaving as though nothing is too hard for him. I guess I owe an awful lot to

you for making me see that Mary was the only person who could straighten him out. She's a wonderful woman! The way she's behaved, it's something I cannot understand!"

"Don't try to understand her," said Clifford. "Just try to be thankful."

A new purpose had come into Clifford's life since that night at Le Minuit. Rather it was his old purpose, but now more grimly determined on, and unmixed and undeterred by other considerations. He was out to get Loveman, and Bradley, and their fellows — and he was also out to protect Mary. And all this was now nothing more than a purely professional job, since matters were as they were with Jack and Mary.

Clifford's long-prevailing reason for holding back on Loveman and the others — that Mary might be free to work out her plan, and that Life might have the chance to test her — no longer had any force with him, now that Mary had exposed herself and renounced her ambition, now that she had nothing at stake. His determination to get Loveman was intensified by his certainty that Loveman was trying to get Mary: Loveman's soft-spoken, cryptic remark in front of Le Minuit, about the game perhaps not being finished, and there perhaps being other cards to play, made him sure that this great spinner of webs had not ceased from spinning. Clifford, putting himself in Loveman's place, realized that the little lawyer had motives for the most desperate

action. Loveman had lost Mary out of his schemes forever; he realized that she would no longer protect him in order to protect herself; he hated her for having blocked him; and he feared her, feared her daily, for she had it in her power to secure his disbarment, to send him to prison.

There was no doubt in Clifford's mind that Loveman was planning — that Loveman would act. And he believed that Loveman, in daily fear, would act quickly. But what would Loveman do?

There was but one way to learn, and that was to keep Loveman under constant and discreet surveillance; and this now became the all-consuming routine of Clifford's life, in which he was aided by Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly and special men supplied him by Commissioner Thorne, and concerning which he took counsel with Uncle George. But days, weeks, went by; nothing happened. As far as the closest scrutiny could reveal, Loveman was going about his daily round of legal business and his nightly round of pleasures, and in no way was he concerning himself about Mary Regan. And likewise Bradley seemed to be confining himself to his own affairs.

This behavior puzzled Clifford. Why were they holding back? But behind this seeming quiet, Clifford knew that things were brewing — and big things. But as to just what they might be, he could get no clue. However, he kept doggedly at his secret watch. There would come a time when

they would doubtless act, and he must be ready and on the spot to take action when the moment came.

One day when Clifford was talking the situation over with Commissioner Thorne, the Commissioner remarked: "They're undoubtedly up to something — and you'll get them in the end, Clifford." And then: "I hear that young Jack Morton has braced up?"

"Yes."

"And I understand that it's the influence of his wife that's keeping him in the strait and narrow."

"Yes."

There was no further reference to Mary Regan. But each understood what was in the other's mind: Thorne knew of Clifford's regard for Mary Regan, and Clifford knew that Thorne knew it.

"Clifford," the Commissioner went on after a moment, "I've twice offered you the position of Chief of the Detective Bureau. I have a man in the place now, but he does n't like it and I'm going to shift him as soon as I can. Clifford, I'm offering that job to you again."

"Thanks, Chief. I appreciate the honor"— and he did. In former times Clifford had looked up to that position as the glory-crowned but unattainable peak in his professional career. He hesitated. "It's a mighty big thing, Chief, — but do you mind if I don't give you my answer until this job I'm on is closed up?"

"All right, Clifford. But remember — I 'm counting on you."

While Clifford kept at his appointed task — always with the sense that something big was gathering, and always wondering why Loveman was holding back — the summer grew toward its prime. Jack he occasionally saw; the young fellow seemed to be keeping his promise made that night out in front of Le Minuit. And occasionally Clifford saw the elder Morton, who was remaining in town despite the heat, to watch over his son in this latest testing of Jack's fiber. But all this while Clifford did not again see Mary.

And then in the early days of August there happened what perhaps had been inevitable this long while — something which was perhaps, despite halts and hopeful upward turns, merely a following of the direction in which this affair had been foredoomed to move since he had first come into it. Clifford first learned of it when Mr. Morton sent for him. He found the financier with his grim power of control trying to repress his agitation.

"Day before yesterday was Jack's twenty-fifth birthday," said Mr. Morton, "and Jack came into that legacy left him by his aunt — two hundred thousand cash, you remember. That same day it was deposited in his name. And that same afternoon he began drinking. He was at it yesterday; he did not appear at the office at all. And last night he did not go home; Mary has not seen him since yester-

day morning. God!" — with a burst of emotion — "I don't like to be asking you this again — but do what you can to find the boy!"

"I'll get him if I can," Clifford said quietly, and went away.

Clifford did some quick thinking. Jack at last might just naturally have reached the limit of the endurance of his good resolution — yes, that probably was the case. But even if so, the weakness of the eaten-away structure of Jack's will was not alone responsible for his break-down and disappearance. All Clifford's instincts, and all his cold reasoning, told him that Loveman was concerned in this latest relapse of Jack. It was, as he well knew, an easy matter to keep a man — either with or against his consent — hidden in the vast human wilderness of New York.

More intently, and more carefully, than before Clifford now followed the little lawyer — about his downtown legal work by day, about the restaurants and roof-gardens at night. Every hour of the twenty-four either Clifford, or the men assigned to help him, had the little man under surveillance. As far as eye could discern, Loveman was preserving the established routine of his life: a figure at various public resorts until three — then to bed — up at eight — at his office at nine-thirty — then with his dinner at seven beginning the round of pleasure for the night.

But on the fourth evening after Jack's disappear-

ance there was a slight variation. Clifford, supping with Uncle George, whose company he found a boon in this late-houred routine, saw Loveman start home at a little before two, an hour earlier than was his wont. In a taxi with Uncle George Clifford followed Loveman's car, saw Loveman when he came to one of the upper West Forties, — a street of one-time handsome residences, — slip out of his car and walk rapidly through the quiet, deserted cross-street. Clifford also got quickly out of his taxi, and slipped into the dark shadow of a stoop — where Uncle George, showing a surprising quickness, joined him a moment later.

A little way down this street, before a black-windowed house, Clifford noted two empty, shadowy automobiles; he saw that they were alike at least in this, that both were low and long, built evidently for speed and the ability to maintain it.

Having reached this darkened and seemingly empty house, Loveman turned and ran quickly up the high, old-fashioned stoop. The next instant he had let himself in with a latch-key.

"I suppose you know what that place is?" whispered Uncle George, gripping Clifford's forearm sharply.

"Yes," breathed Clifford — "the house of Joe Le Bain!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HOUSE OF MONSIEUR LE BAIN

MONSIEUR LE BAIN, from catering to the reckless rich and to spendthrifts who had large sums that abode with them for a flitting month or so, and to monied persons about whose characters and designs he preferred to remain safely ignorant — Monsieur Le Bain had discovered that such as these, on occasion, desired a greater privacy than his Grand Alcazar or his Le Minuit or any other restaurant afforded them — a sumptuous exclusiveness in which, without danger of being seen by uninvited eyes or their merry-making marred or restrained by the propinquity of strangers, a party might dine or sup *en famille*. Quick to see and seize opportunities, Le Bain had devised the material equipment to please such patronage. In addition to the Grand Alcazar and Le Minuit, which he advertised and to which he welcomed all, he had set up another establishment which he did not advertise, and of which few even knew, and to which even fewer ever gained admission.

This was an old brownstone house in the upper Forties between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, outwardly most discreet and decorous — and, moreover, inwardly so most of the time. The house was furnished

as a private residence, and richly furnished, too, albeit somewhat garishly since Le Bain's latter-day æsthetics had been founded upon the gilt and rococo of Broadway restaurants. There was a large drawing-room whose windows were so deftly curtained that no inner light ever filtered into the street; behind that a large dining-room, in which one might be as merry as one liked without passers-by being halted by laugh or song — or by any possible sound of a less happy character that might originate therein. And in the basement there was a perfect kitchen, which, on those occasions when the house was briefly inhabited, Le Bain peopled with his most efficient and reticent retainers — it being understood that after the dinner or supper had been served, and if the host so directed, these cooks and waiters and ladies' maids should vanish. And that the party might not suffer from such withdrawal, there was installed in the butler's pantry an ingenious refrigerator in which foods were kept cold and wines properly iced — and from which host and guests might serve themselves.

Such was Le Bain's other establishment. For the time paid for it was actually the lessee's "home" — as much immune from police interference as any other man's castle. This Le Bain would sub-let possibly two or three times a week, possibly once a month, to some one he knew or some one with trustworthy introduction — always at a price commensurate with the extraordinary privacy he supplied.

And he never asked questions; particularly did Le Bain prefer to know only the name of the renting host — never of the guests. Then, if anything ever happened there which got to the police, — and it might, — Le Bain would be able to say to interrogating officers that he maintained this place for patrons who wished to give "home dinner parties" — surely a legitimate business enterprise! — and he knew nothing at all about who was there and what they did.

When Peter Loveman, at two o'clock in the morning, quickly closed the outside door, slipped along the hallway, and then drew aside the hangings and peered reconnoiteringly into the great dining-room (finished as to walls and ceiling in paneled Flemish oak, lighted by a sunlike chandelier with multitudinous pendants), he saw just what he had expected to see, just what he had so skillfully planned and so adroitly manipulated. About a small, intimate table, food-strewn and wine-stained, — a table almost lost in this great room which could have seated a party of fifty, — sat Nina Cordova, Nan Burdette, Hilton, Jack Morton, and a slight, evilly handsome third man. His people had done their work well, exactly as per instructions, Loveman noted: the servants had obviously been sent away, and Jack was in the desired state of reckless and pliable hilarity. Loveman continued to look in for a moment, hesitating. He would have vastly preferred not to be here — there was too much danger

for him. But his clever scheming, whose original outline the interference of Clifford and the uncalculated elements of human nature in Mary Regan had thrown repeatedly into disarray, was now nearing the culmination of what was its latest readjustment.

Loveman had held back his many-elemented new plan — two big plans they were, in fact — because each was dependent in a degree upon the other. He had not dared act too quickly in the matter of Mary, for such a course might, by some twist of circumstances or human nature, affect Jack, and therefore upset what he had contemplated concerning Jack. To succeed in either he had to succeed in both; and to succeed in both he had to synchronize them. Whether he had done this, the hour or so ahead was to prove.

Loveman frankly admitted to himself that his affairs and his own personal safety were in a critical condition — critical to a degree never before reached in his career. As he now had matters planned, he stood to win everything — or almost everything; and also he stood to lose everything — or almost everything. In such a crisis, where all was at stake, he had to be on hand — despite any added risks — to watch over, and if necessary direct, the final moves of this his ultimate plan.

Loveman stepped into the great dining-room, and stepped also into a scene that was typical of how the forces which are behind Big Pleasure, which are

a part of it, handle those who weakly or unwarily let themselves be carried too far by its alluring and mighty current.

"Good-evening, everybody," he called cheerily. "Hello, Jack. This is certainly one quiet little birthday party you're giving." Loveman had himself instigated it, though these five at the table had brought it to pass. "Kind of you to invite me, Jack."

"Got to have ole Peter — else no birthday party," cried Jack, swaying up and taking Loveman's hand, holding on to one of Nina's with his left. "Had three birthday parties this week; goin' have seven next week. Peter, y're invited to 'em all! You there, Slim," — this to the slight, handsome young man, — "get fresh bottle Pommery, open for ole Peter Loveman."

Without taking his eyes off Jack, Loveman let them also include Nina Cordova. She gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"Thanks, Jack," said Loveman; and then in an amiably chiding tone: "But I must say I'm surprised. I thought you had settled down to be a steady business man."

"Damn business!"

"But your wife, Jack? I thought you were trying to attend to business for her sake."

Jack showed a flash of petulant ill-temper. "Tha's wha' make me sore at her! Always drivin' me to work. Always work — always business!

Man's got ri' to li'l' relaxation, ain't he?" His good-nature was back again. "Tell you wha', man's got ri' to do as he likes. Tell you wha', nothin' like bein' free!"

"Oh, I don't know," put in Nina with a challenging shrug of her dainty bare shoulders, and a disbelieving smile. "That's what you say — but you would n't really dare do it and be it. You see, Peter," with her pleasing drawl, — she was a better actress off the stage than on it, — "this bold young gentleman, who believes so strongly in his right to do as he pleases, has just been trying to tell me how much he loves me. He's a nice little boy, Jack, — but I don't believe him."

"But, Nina, li'l' girl, I do love you!" protested Jack. "Here's Slim with tha' champagne. Slim, fill all glasses. Everybody ready? All ri' — here's Nina, only girl I love, only girl I ever goin' love!"

Jack drained his glass. The others merely sipped theirs.

"But drinking a glass of wine does n't prove anything," said Nina, with her pleasantly provoking drawl. "You say you're free, and you say you love me — but you're afraid really to prove it."

"Not afraid!" Jack declared stoutly. "Prove it any way you say!"

She gazed at him in amused skepticism — yet a most alluring smile on her young face. "Oh, no, you would n't, Jack. There's only one way to prove your independence and your love. You know what

that is — to drop everything else, and go away with me."

"I'll do it to-night!" he cried. "Say, listen, Nina, — know a li'l' place up in Adirondacks — nice, quiet li'l' place —"

"No, thanks," she interrupted. "If you took me off into hiding, that would n't prove anything. Besides, I want to be where there's something doing, and where there's people — you understand, *classy* people."

"Tha's all ri'! Make it Newport, Bar Harbor, any ole swell resort you like. I'm no quitter!"

"I believe you really are in earnest," mused Nina, her large eyes upon him.

"Sure, I'm earnest! Make it Narragansett Pier — any ole place you like!"

She shook her head, and sighed. "You're awfully good, Jack, but it can't be done. I've no clothes — and those places take clothes — and clothes, the right sort of clothes, they take money — and I have no money."

"Wha's money!" Jack laughed. "Tha's nothing! I got money. I give you a check."

"Really?" — the large, almost childish eyes still upon him. "Yes, you really are in earnest. But one check would n't buy all I need."

"You li'l' fool — pre' li'l' fool," he cried, patting her cheek, and laughing again. "I can make it one big check."

She shook her head. "I don't know anything

about checks and banks, but I know it would take three."

"All ri'," he said good-humoredly, tickled by her ignorance. He drew out his pocket check-book. "How much?"

"Oh, I don't know. Could n't you just sign your name, and let me fill those spaces when I buy the things?"

"Sure. Peter, you always carry ole fountain pen. Lemme have ole fountain pen jus' one minute."

The pen was handed over. Jack signed three checks and passed them to Nina. She murmured warm thanks, and then looked from them to him, apologetic doubt in her eyes.

"A woman's clothes cost an awful lot, Jack, — more than you guess. Would it be all right if I had to fill these in for perhaps as much as five hundred dollars apiece?"

Again Jack laughed. "Sure — you pre' li'l' fool!"

"You can laugh, but I want to be certain," she protested. "I don't want to get in trouble by having people come after me for having passed checks that had no money behind them."

Again Jack laughed. "'S all ri', Nina. Listen." He leaned toward her confidentially. "Other day, you know, I'm twenty-five; came into nice li'l' ole pile money. Soak it away in bank. Since then I buy tha' nice li'l' ole car — the car I drive you up here in, Nina — some li'l' ole car when I turn her loose —

nothin' ever passes her — an' I draw out li'l' spendin' money. Tha's all." He snickered once more. "Five hundred — is my check good for tha' — oh, say! Listen, Nina. It's all down on stubs of my check-book — wha' I deposit — wha' I draw out. Look for yourself — tha'll show you!"

He handed her the check-book. She examined the stubs, then gazed at him in stupefaction.

"Why!" she said breathlessly, — "why — over one hundred and eighty-nine thousand dollars!"

"Sure!" He grinned delightedly. "Am I good for five hundred — eh, Nina?"

"I beg your pardon, Jack. Why — I never dreamed — Then, of course, it will be all right if I make them as much as five hundred each."

Her face broke into a sudden, naïve smile. "And I tell you what, Jack, — I'll make them payable to 'Cash,' then I won't have to endorse them nor will anybody else — and if anybody wants to start a scandal, why, nobody that sees them will ever suspect, and certainly not be able to prove, that I got money from you. It'll protect both of us."

Nina seemed to have another inspiration — a very business-like one. "And what's more, I'll just fill these in now and have it all done with. Peter, let me have your fountain pen. Thanks. And, Jack, while I'm writing, you might pour me a fresh glass, and yourself one, and one for the others — that's a dear boy. Remember you're the host."

While Jack was unsteadily doing a host's duty,

decanting almost as much of the amber fluid upon the cloth as into the glasses, Nina filled out the checks; and as she wrote she three times repeated aloud: "Payable to — Cash — Five — Hundred — Dollars."

She returned Loveman's pen, waved the checks daintily until the ink had dried, then slipped them within her sex's invariable postal box. Loveman glanced at his watch and rose briskly.

"Excuse me a minute or so," he said. "I promised to call up a party at two o'clock, and it's almost half after."

He disappeared through the heavily curtained doorway through which he had entered. The next moment he reappeared.

"Nina, just as I started to use the 'phone, there came a call for you. A woman, but she refused to give her name."

When Nina had stepped into the hall and the heavy curtains had swung behind her, Loveman silently held out his right hand. Also in silence Nina reached within the bosom of her gown, drew out the checks and handed them to him. He unfolded them, scrutinized them sharply, refolded them, and slipped them into an inner pocket.

"Nina, you certainly did it great," he said in a whisper. "If you were as good on the stage as you are in a play like this, Dave Belasco would be paying you a thousand a week. Great stuff, Nina!"

And then rapidly: "Go on back in. Remember

you've got to keep him going for two days. He must n't suspect a thing, and we've got to keep him out of the way until these checks go through."

"I understand," and silently that excellent off-stage actress reëntered the drawing-room.

Beneath the stairway of Le Bain's house of a hundred precautions was an item which on occasions helped measurably toward the ultra-private pleasures of his guests — a telephone installed in a closet. Loveman stepped through the door of this, closed it, and after a wait was speaking to Mary Regan at the Mordona — speaking in a well-mimicked voice: —

"Hello. . . . This is Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly, of the Tenderloin Squad, — you know, friend of Mr. Clifford. Mr. Clifford has just found Mr. Morton — Jack Morton, I mean. Jack is sick of what he's been doing the last few days — half crazy with remorse, you understand. Mr. Clifford can't leave Jack, and he asked me to telephone you to come for him. We're all at" — here Loveman gave the address — "it's one of those old private houses made into an exclusive restaurant. Just ring and I'll let you in. . . . All right, then, we'll expect you in half an hour."

He called a second number, which he got instantly, and he spoke in his natural voice, though his words to any other ears save those at the end of the wire, might have been enigmatic: —

"I wish to report a full crop," he said. "Immediate delivery is requested."

With that he hung up and stepped out of the closet, wiping away the moisture begotten by the stifling air of the cubicle. The full-bodied little man, that Fifth Avenue and Broadway knew best as an amiable, unflurried smile, was now set and grim of face, excited with suspense and calculations. All had thus far gone well with his plan. Immediately before him was the next vital development, swiftly approaching its culmination. If all went there, too, as planned — why, he would be safe — no man could touch him — and once emerged from the desperate methods into which his present danger had forced him, he would be more careful in the future.

Resuming his amiable smile, Peter Loveman rejoined his companions in the dining-room.

CHAPTER XXIX

CLIFFORD WAITS ON GUARD

For a minute or more, after he had seen Loveman go up the high stoop of Le Bain's dark-windowed house, Clifford had stood with Uncle George in the shadow across the deserted street and had thought rapidly. He knew the character of that silent, respectable-fronted residence; he had heard rumors, vague, to be sure, of certain happenings that had taken place within; and he had heard rumors — again only rumors — of happenings in which unwitnessed and unrestrained pleasure was not the dominant purpose of the organizer of the party. He was certain that some vital phase of Loveman's shrewd scheming was being, or was to be, enacted within: Le Bain's reticent and expensive house was not taken for ordinary pleasures or commonplace enterprises.

He had to get inside, somehow; he had to know what was happening there. Without making the test, he knew Le Bain would have upon those two front doors, stoop and basement, locks of a character that it would be wasted time to try to pick or force quietly. Of course he might get police aid, and, ignoring such a mere detail as law, might break down a door — but that would give the alarm to

whoever might be within and would spoil everything. And then he might ring the bell, and before the person who answered could slam the door upon him, he could drive his way through — but this again would give alarm and would ruin everything. The very essence of the plan forming in his mind was to try to keep himself in the unseen background, to discover just what Loveman and his associates had under way, to let them carry their plan through to its completion, and then, when he had the goods on them, to act swiftly. That is, if he could. There was no other way.

With Uncle George he reëntered the waiting taxicab and hurried toward Le Minuit. On Broadway he met two of Lieutenant Jimmie Kelly's plain-clothes men who were willingly impressed into his service.

At the blazing entrance to Le Minuit Uncle George halted. "I guess I'll not go up with you, son," he said. "I'll do more good if I don't openly mess in police affairs. But I'll hang about."

Clifford nodded. With the two plain-clothes men he mounted the wide bright stairway that led to the Midnight Café.

"Tell Le Bain I want to see him in his office," he said to the door-man, and moved quickly among the tables and passed through a gray-and-gilt door. In less than a minute Le Bain entered.

"Joe," Clifford began brusquely, without prelude, "I want the key to that private house of yours, and I want it damned quick."

Le Bain tried to look blank. "What private house? Why, Bob, I don't know —"

"Cut out the stalling!" interrupted Clifford. "It won't do you any good — and I've no time to listen to it. I know all about that house. And you need n't say the people who have it to-night have the only keys — I know you have a lot of duplicates for the convenience of members of a party that prefer not to go there in a group. So come across!"

"But, Bob, honest to God —"

"No time for your lies, Joe! Now, you listen to this if you care for your own health. The people there won't know I got in with your consent, and you'll not get in bad with them. That is, unless they are pulling something raw there — in which case I can testify that you assisted me. On the other hand, if you don't come across I'll have the Commissioner of Licenses revoke your license for Le Minuit within twenty-four hours, and you'll find you'll never be able to do business again in this town. Quick, now, — let's have that key!"

Monsieur Le Bain, immigrant from somewhere in that part of France which lies below Fourteenth Street, slowly turned about and fumbled in a drawer of his desk. He was a long time about it, but when he finally turned there was a key in his long yellowish-white hands. Clifford took the key, but as he did so he caught the fading remnant of a crafty look in Le Bain's shifty eyes.

"Boys," he said sharply, "you stick right here

and entertain this gentleman for two hours. He can do anything he likes except talk to people — or talk into that telephone."

Clifford caught the twitch in Le Bain's face, and he knew he had forestalled the other's intent to telephone warning to the brief tenants of the house.

Clifford was down in the street two minutes after he had entered Le Minuit. Here he found Uncle George, waiting.

"Hate to use you as a messenger boy, Uncle George," he said rapidly — "but you're the best possible man for the job. Mind skirmishing around Broadway until you find Jimmie Kelly and some more of his men?"

"I'm hired," the old man replied promptly.

"Tell Jimmie to hang around the Knickerbocker on the chance that I may telephone him. And you might hang around the 'phone yourself."

"I'll never leave it!" said Uncle George.

Clifford hurried from Le Minuit, and five minutes later he was unlocking the heavy outside door, and then the door within that, of the dark-faced house in the upper Forties. He crept down the dim hall, muted with Persian rugs, and soon he was gazing through cautiously parted curtains into the oak-paneled dining-room, and at the six celebrants of Jack Morton's third birthday party of that week.

Clifford watched and listened, every sense alert. The last of that little scene between Jack and Nina Cordova over the checks was being enacted: he saw

Jack, laughing at the business ignorance of the "pre' li'l' fool," sign the checks and hand them over — and he saw Nina's scribbling pen fill them in (before Jack's eyes) — and he heard her slowly repeat: "Payable to — Cash — Five — Hundred — Dollars."

Clifford drew a quick breath. He understood it all now — or thought he did. So that was what Loveman was up to! Well, it was worth Loveman's while to pay almost any price for the guaranteed privacy of Le Bain's house!

The next moment Loveman was coming straight toward him. But Clifford had already made a swift survey of the resources of his situation; and before Loveman was in the hallway, he was behind a pair of tapestries at the forward end of the hall. The space behind him was unlighted, but he sensed that he was in the drawing-room. Peering out, he saw the brief scene between Nina and Loveman. That little scene convinced him that he had been correct in his conclusion of a few minutes before as to the significance of this affair in this house that told no secrets.

For a minute Clifford thought he had solved the mystery — that he had his case complete, all except arranging for his arrests. Then Loveman entered the telephone booth beneath the stairway. That was a new element. What could Loveman be about? Clifford leaned out and strove to listen, but not one word of Loveman's filtered through the closet's sound-proof door.

Loveman left the booth and rejoined the company. Clifford had noted a slit of light at one side of the darkened drawing-room, and toward this he now noiselessly made his way. The slit proved to be a parting in the heavy curtains between the drawing- and dining-rooms. Motionlessly Clifford watched the group of six — and all the while he wondered what Loveman's telephoning could be about. There was drinking, and banter, and reassertions of Jack's determination to prove himself a free spirit, and two stumbling attempts by Jack to dance with Nina to the music of his own singing — and thus half an hour passed.

Presently there was a ring. At a word from Loveman, the evilly handsome young man — "Slim" Harrison, Clifford knew him to be, a crack driver of racing-cars, and a proficient in all the evils of Broadway — rose and left the drawing-room and passed forward through the hallway. Clifford heard him open the front door, and remark courteously: "Come right in — Mr. Clifford is waiting for you."

Footsteps — two pairs of them — returned down the hallway, and then Clifford saw Slim Harrison swing apart the other pair of tapestries, saying, "They're waiting for you in here." And then stepping into the brilliant light of the great dining-room he saw Mary Regan.

Two paces within the doorway she suddenly halted. "Where's Mr. Clifford and Lieutenant Kelly?" she exclaimed. Clifford saw her stiffen and

sharply eye the group at the table. Then her gaze fixed upon Jack, and she said quietly enough: "Jack — I've come to take you home."

Jack swayed uncertainly to his feet, his face sagging with amazement. "Why — why — Mary —"

But Clifford heard nothing of the next few sentences. That instant he understood it all — or thought he did. He knew now the substance of Loveman's telephone message. He saw now the magnitude of this present situation just before him. Loveman's great scheme — the whole of it — had been planned and drawn together, and timed to take place within that hour. Clifford did not yet prevision the exact character of the further developments — but what better place for it than Le Bain's house, from which no sound issued, which kept secret all it saw and heard?

Swiftly, silently, Clifford slipped out into the hallway, into the telephone closet, and closed the sound-proof door. He got the Knickerbocker Hotel on the wire, and a few minutes later he was snapping out sentences to Uncle George.

"What, Jimmie has n't showed up yet! . . . For God's sake, get hold of him somehow — tell him to come right over to Le Bain's house — you know the number — with three or four of his men. Something big is going to break! — big! — you get me? And tell him to round up Mr. Morton on the way and see that he comes here after his son. I'll put the key under the doormat, so he can get in without

disturbing any one. I want the thing to come to a head before we act."

Noiselessly Clifford crept out and hid the key. Then noiselessly he slipped back to his post at the curtains in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN WOMEN NEVER TALK

MARY REGAN had drawn nearer the table, and pale, her figure tense, she was gazing fixedly at Jack — waiting. Jack was gazing back sheepishly, stubbornly, — and Nina Cordova and Nan Burdette and Hilton were staring at Mary in insolent triumph. Little Loveman's face was expressionless. Behind her, near the doorway, ready to move swiftly, if there was need, stood Slim Harrison.

At that instant Clifford realized that his supreme interest was centered upon that trapped figure in the next room — and that his supreme efforts would have as their chief object the extrication of Mary Regan from whatever crisis might be about to develop. But at the same time Clifford realized that his duty demanded that he hold himself in check, and allow Loveman to reveal the details of his plan by action, and then catch him in the act. He would then have evidence — real evidence.

"Are you coming, Jack?" Mary was saying quietly.

"Go on with her, Jack," Nina Cordova taunted him. "None of us believed you had the nerve really to go through with what you were bragging about!"

"Man's got ri' do wha'ever he pleases — got ri'

have li'l' fun," Jack said obstinately, his eyes still fixed on Mary.

"Are you coming, Jack?" she repeated in the same quiet voice.

He wavered. Clifford sensed that the young fellow's finer instincts were trying to struggle through the murk of his being; and mixed with his disgust he felt a pity for this likable weakling who had been brought to this low estate.

"All ri'," Jack said sullenly, and started to leave the table.

"One moment, Jack," cut in the soft, even voice of Loveman — and Clifford saw Loveman give Mary a quick, vindictive glance. "Before you go with her, Jack, I think you ought to know who she is. I only just now found out myself. Her name is Mary Regan, all right, but she comes of a crook family, and she herself has been a confidence-woman and all-around adventuress. She married you solely to do you out of your money. Ask her to deny it!"

"It's true, Jack. But —"

"Understand now why she wanted to keep your marriage secret?" Loveman cut in. "Plain enough: she knew that if it were generally known that you had married her, you would quickly learn the truth about her and that would finish her game. And that self-sacrifice business in letting your father believe that she was your mistress, all in order to protect you — can't you see that she was really doing it to *protect herself*, and protect her own little scheme for

playing you along as a sucker? Want to go along with her now, do you, so she can soak you some more?"

Jack, steadying himself with hands on the table, was staring across at Mary. "'S tha' so?" he demanded thickly.

"Part of it. But, Jack, listen —"

"I'll not listen! Tha's enough!" he burst out. He had irked at the restraints she had put upon him; and since for him she represented the routine life, he had unconsciously begun to weary of her. And all the while he had been sneakingly ashamed that he had accepted this supposed sacrifice from her. "I'll not go home!" he shouted across at her. "Un'erstand? I'll never go home! Un'erstand? I'm through with you! Un'erstand? You crook, you — you li'l', dam', sneakin' crook!"

Mary stared at the inflamed, wine-flushed face thrust toward her. Then she drew a deep breath — a breath tense and quivering. Then a heavy voice sounded behind her.

"Guess you've got the right dope at last, Morton, on this Regan dame."

As Mary turned quickly, Clifford's eyes went to the other curtained doorway. Just inside it stood the broad, powerful figure of Bradley. So engrossed had Clifford been in the scene between Jack and Mary that he had not heard Bradley's entrance — which had doubtless been effected by one of Le Bain's many duplicate keys.

Clifford gasped within himself. The affair was

even bigger than he had thought a few minutes gone. And in a flash he guessed the explanation of Bradley's prompt appearance upon the scene: that while in the telephone closet Loveman had sent *two* messages — that after getting Mary's promise to come, he had notified Bradley.

Mary looked back at Loveman, ignoring Jack. Clifford could see that her face was very pale; but she was straight and her gaze was unafraid.

"It's no use trying to make Jack see the truth, Peter Loveman," she said in a slow, determined voice. "There's no denying that you've beaten me. You have removed all my motives for keeping silent about you. I know enough about you and can produce enough evidence to secure your conviction on half a dozen counts — and, believe me, Peter Loveman, I'm going to give all that evidence to Mr. Clifford."

She turned to Bradley, and her steady voice went on. "You were a crook when you were in the Police Department — and you've been a crook, playing every sort of crooked, double-crossing game, since you became a private detective — and I have the evidence on you, too, that will send you away — and believe me, Mr. Bradley, I'm going to use it!"

Loveman started toward her, but Bradley checked him with a gesture of a big hand.

"Oh, you are, are you!" he said to Mary, and advanced until he stood squarely before her. An ugly look had come into his face; her last words had

fired his animal anger. "Oh, I guess you're not, sister!" he said with crunching grimness. "I've had to hold off on you too long, but at last I've got you where I want you! You ain't going to expose me, and you ain't going to expose anybody else, and you ain't ever goin' to hurt anybody! Do you get me, sister?"

He was glowering with malignant purpose. Clifford was wildly a-pulse with the desire to leap out and hurl himself on Bradley. But the time had not come; he had to wait and see the full purpose of this night's design.

"And, let me tell you, Mary Regan," the heavy voice gritted on, "that I've come here myself because I want the personal satisfaction of attending to you — and because I did n't want any slip-up on the job. And I'm going to tell you in advance just exactly what's going to happen to you. Why? Because your knowing that is going to make you suffer all the more — and, damn you, you're going to suffer the limit! I ain't afraid to talk out, because we're all in this together!"

He paused a minute; then demanded: "Want to know what's coming to you?"

She stood silent, eyeing him steadily. Breathlessly Clifford waited. Without being aware of it, he had drawn his automatic.

"I ain't going to croak you. That would be too soft for you — it would be over too soon."

"Help!" she called, with all her voice.

"Go to it, kid, — do it again," encouraged Bradley. "That's right, Slim," — Harrison had caught her elbows from behind, as she had turned to run. "I guess you'll stand still now and hear me through. First item, sister, — have you heard of that necklace that was stole a week ago from one of the rich dames that lives in the Mordona?"

Mary did not speak.

"It's a diamond necklace," Bradley went on. "Worth ten thousand — mebbe twenty. I've got that diamond necklace on me — never mind how I got it. Now, as I said, the dame that lost the ice lives in the Mordona. Also you've been living in the Mordona. Also, though they've never hung a case on you, the police know you've been a crook. Now, that there diamond necklace is going to be found by the police on Mary Regan. That's item number one."

He paused to watch the effect of this upon her. White, she looked at him unflinchingly.

"Here's item number two. You see Nan Burdette, and Hilton, and Slim Harrison, — all publicly notorious characters, — and I know I ain't offending any of them when I say that if there's any such thing as morals, they ain't never troubled any one of the three o' them. There's a big car outside — it's got speed, believe me — and Slim is certainly some driver. In about two minutes Nan and Hilton and Slim and you start off on a joy-ride — and you'll be fixed so you won't do any objecting."

Mary still gazed at him in white steadfastness. Clifford clutched his automatic with steely tenseness.

"And waiting in the harbor of Greenport, out at the end of Long Island, is a swell little motor yacht. The crew has all been fixed. In two or three hours — Slim here can make the run in about that time — the four of you go aboard and begin a joy-cruise among those islands and bays out there where nobody is ever goin' to bother you. In about ten days the police will be tipped off as to who stole the necklace and where you're to be found — and you'll be pinched in this crowd here, and the necklace found in the bottom of your bag. This bunch will swear that you came along voluntarily — that you really helped get up the party. And the crew will testify how you and the others behaved — and the bunch here will admit it. Booze all the time — Slim, here, your special guy — the lid off everything. I guess you get me!"

If she did not, Clifford did. He drew a deep breath. It was all devilishly cunning. But tense and excited though he was, Clifford recognized that the situation was far larger than just this one case on which he looked; that in a limited way it was typical. Many a woman, in this world where he had been working these many months, had been the victim of kindred daring enterprises when necessary for the safety or the projects of these subtle *entrepreneurs* of Big Pleasure. And these women had never dared tell what had happened to them.

Bradley drove on at her. "And your being pinched on a joy-cruise with this bunch, which will stamp you as being the same sort of character — and that necklace being found on you — this, with what the police already know about you, will fix you good and proper! Squeal all you want to on me or Loveman, or anybody you like — you'll be so smeared your word won't count for a damn with a judge or anybody else!"

Terrible as it was, Clifford almost admired the plan, so ghastly was it in its completeness, its convincingness. He saw that Mary's face was now drawn, her eyes wide — saw that she was perceiving as inescapable the cunning fate that had been planned for her — saw that she was seeing it as a thing beyond her ever to explain away.

Taut as a violin string, Clifford directed his senses to the front of the house for an instant — listening. Why were not Jimmie Kelly and the others on hand to reinforce him? He was not conscious that this scene, which had seemed so long to him, was in reality only a few minutes in the acting.

When he peered back into the dining-room, Jack was lurching toward Bradley. He halted swayingly and pointed a finger at the detective, the man that was in him struggling once more to rise.

"See here, Bradley," he said thickly. "Tha's no go! I no stan' f'r raw business like tha'!"

"Shut up, you booze pup!" Bradley snapped at him. "What we're doing, we're doing as much for

you as anybody else. She's always played you rotten, ain't she? Well, we're just fixing her so she'll be showed up in public for what she really is — and so she can't squeeze any dough out of you, and so's you have it easy getting a divorce. So back up, you boob!"

He glanced at the group at the table. "Get your things on, Burdette and Hilton," he ordered. He turned again to Mary and her keeper: "All ready, Slim," he announced sharply.

His slow taunting of his prisoner now changed to swiftest action. He drew from a pocket a heavy strap which he threw in a loop over Mary's head and with his huge strength buckled tightly at her elbows. In the same instant Slim seized her head from behind, and with a fierce, practiced grip forced a gag into her mouth, which the next instant he tied.

"Where's that cloak?" Bradley demanded. Nan Burdette handed it to him, and he flung it about Mary. "Slim, got your car all ready?"

"Yes."

"Then gimme that motor-veil, Slim." It was handed over. "And you keep out of this, Morton, — remember we're doing it to help you. Just hold her, Loveman."

Nan Burdette and Hilton stepped forward and held apart the curtains — while Jack, his face still wine-flushed, looked on waveringly, Nina holding his arm.

Bradley threw the veil over Mary's head and began to knot it behind. "Get ready, there, to take her out!" he ordered sharply.

"Why does n't Jimmie Kelly come?" Clifford's wild suspense cried within him.

CHAPTER XXXI

WHEN OLD FOES GET TOGETHER

BUT Clifford dared wait no longer for his reinforcements — and he dared not shoot, with Mary standing between him and his most-desired target, Bradley. He sprang through the curtains, his automatic in his right hand, and swung his left fist mightily just beneath the ear of the unsuspecting Slim Harrison, who went down like a dead man.

"Look out!" shrilled Loveman, loosening Mary's arm.

Bradley whirled about, instinctively holding Mary before him, from whose shoulders the unloosened cloak was falling, and from whose face the as yet unknotted veil fell away.

"Come on, boys," Clifford cried, as if to a squad behind him. "Guard the front door, and round up the whole bunch!"

"Beat it through the basement!" Bradley roared to the others. And at the same instant he hurled Mary straight at the on-coming Clifford. As she struck Clifford, Bradley leaped upon him and knocked his pistol flying from his hand, and then, brushing Mary aside with a powerful sweep, he grappled Clifford in his bear-like arms. The two men went swaying heavily. Clifford had a brief

vision of the others staring on nonplussed — then they were gone, and he and Bradley were alone, except for the limp Harrison on the floor.

"So it was all a bluff — those others!" Bradley snarled at him. Exultant triumph gleamed in his malignant face. "God, I been waiting — long enough for this — but I'm going to get you at last!"

Clifford tried to struggle free: Mary must have been taken by those others, and his every impulse called on him to pursue. But there was no breaking the clutch of those mighty, hate-hungry arms. He tried only to struggle defensively, hoping for the appearance of Jimmie Kelly — but in a few moments he realized that if he merely tried to hold his own against this maddened antagonist he would swiftly be a defeated man — and that once beaten down he would be maimed to the exhaustion of Bradley's fury. And then he realized and accepted this for what it was and what it had to be: it was that "next time" for which Bradley had often wished — the "time" which between these two old enemies there was no avoiding.

This splendid dining-room had in its time looked upon many strange scenes, but never had it looked upon such a scene as that which followed. In each man — hostile always, and super-enemies since Clifford had driven Bradley from the Police Department by the exposure of his criminal practices — was the same supreme desire to destroy the other, destroy him physically — to crush him utterly with

infuriated muscles. Grappling each other they went staggering about the great muted room. The table, with its champagne glasses, its silver-and-glass épergne of terraced fruit, went toppling over. The next moment a splendid if incongruous buhl cabinet was a wreck and its ostentatious exhibit of cut-glass was a thousand fragments upon the floor. And still the two men-beasts swayed about in their destructive fury.

A minute of this mad straining of muscle against muscle, and that part of Clifford's rage which was unbridled madness disappeared — though the rage itself remained. His head began to clear. He perceived that in such an animal-like struggle as this he was foredoomed: Bradley was the heavier and had the greater strength. So he began to try to break free: if he could change this to a fight with fists, and could keep Bradley at arm's length, there would be a different tale, for he knew himself Bradley's superior at boxing. But Bradley also knew this and clung unbreakingly on: his was the art of the New York policeman who has risen from the "gashouse district" — an art in which no practice that will maim or win is barred. He kicked fiercely at Clifford's shins; he tried to drive his knee up into Clifford's stomach; suddenly bending his own body inwardly into an arc, he as suddenly contracted his gorilla-like arms, with the intent to disable his enemy, caught unawares — perhaps break his back; and he closed a huge hand upon Clifford's face as

though it would strip the features from the skull — and only removed that awful grip when Clifford sunk his teeth into the heel of the palm.

For the time Clifford had forgotten all but Bradley. Had he thought of Jimmie Kelly, he would now have resented Jimmie's entrance.

All this while, whenever he could get a free arm, and dared risk a blow, Clifford was driving his fist into the glowering face before his own. He was not directing his blows in the hope of a knock-out; the range was too short for his fist to secure the crashing power for that; but he sent his fists at the lips, at the nose, at the eyes. He was working toward an end, now — working with a cold mind, though with fury unabated. He wanted those lips and nostrils to stream blood; he wanted those eyes to puff up and close. That of itself would not win him this gigantic struggle, since Bradley's great strength would not be reduced thereby. But it might cause Bradley to lose all self-control, and in his huge, unguarded violence to give Clifford the opening for which he was working and waiting.

Clifford's nerves and muscles were now remembering something of the skill that had been his when he had been a member of his university's champion wrestling team. But he was carefully masking his plan. To Bradley he was apparently fighting the same kind of fight as his own — where brute strength triumphed in the end. And with Clifford there was the question whether his old skill at its best would

avail against such superior strength as Bradley's — and also the question, would he get the chance to use it?

At length there came a moment when Bradley thought that he had won. He gave Clifford a supreme bear-hug — more than once he had thus cracked strong men's ribs. Clifford gave a gasping cry, his mouth fell loosely agape, his knees gave way, and he hung a dead weight in Bradley's arms. Bradley was not primarily a fist-fighter, but he knew the value of a fist at the right moment.

"I've got you now — damn you!" he gasped fiercely, and loosened his right arm to draw back his fist to drive it into that flaccid face for the finishing blow.

But that blow was never delivered. With a lightning swiftness Clifford wrenched free from that too-confident left arm, half dropped to the floor — shot swiftly up with a backward leap that placed him behind Bradley, and as he came up his left arm darted under Bradley's left shoulder, and his left hand crooked itself upon the back of Bradley's bull neck. And in the same instant his right hand shot forward and caught Bradley's right wrist.

Bradley gave a sneering laugh. "Want a kid's horseback ride, do you!" Snarling contemptuously again, Bradley shook his heavy shoulders as a great dog might shake its dripping ruff. But Clifford did not fly off. Instead his body braced itself and his arms stiffened. Bradley's head was driven sharply

into his chest, his right arm was drawn out straight. He gave a grunt and set his muscles contemptuously against this unknown maneuver. Not yet did the man dream what was happening to him.

Grimly Clifford began to exert his strength, himself wondering if he could carry this thing through. This hold that he had upon Bradley was a hold that he had practiced in some fractional degree of its potentialities in friendly contests — but never had he seen that hold used upon a human being to the reputed limits of its effectiveness. He recalled the avarice of this man, the brutal cunning, the ruthlessness, the devil's misuse of power — the thousands he had bled financially, the unnumbered ones he had "framed" and whose freedom he had coldly sworn away — and Clifford was aflame with retributive rage for all those whom this man in his might had made suffer. It was as though the strength of all these sufferers had been transferred into him. Certainly he never had had such might before. Slowly, inch by inch he drew Bradley's right arm back and downward — Bradley straining with outstanding muscles and corded ligaments to withstand the terrific leverage.

The right arm reached its lowest arc, then Clifford began to bend it back and pull it up. A groan burst from Bradley — then, "Take a chance, Slim; for God's sake, shoot!"

There was a report: a bullet grazed Clifford's scalp — it must have missed Bradley's head by

inches. Clifford, raising his set face, his eyes bulging from his own effort, saw the dazed Slim on one elbow, aiming at him again. He swung Bradley about, so that his body was a better protection, and, heaving, panting, went on drawing that straining arm up — inch by inch.

Suddenly the curtains parted and Jimmie Kelly entered, behind him three of his men, Mr. Morton and Uncle George. Jimmie saw Slim's pointed weapon following the pair, waiting its chance; and leaping in he tore it from that deadly hand.

"Steady, Bob," he cried, "and I'll get Bradley for you!"

"Keep out of this!" Clifford panted hoarsely. "I've got him myself."

They all stood back and stared at those straining, locked figures. The two seemed hardly to move, so tensely was the force of one set against the force of the other. But slowly, slowly, Clifford forced the right arm of Bradley up behind his back. Then summoning his all of strength, he heaved sharply and mightily upwards, as though he was lifting the very foundations of the house. There was a sharp report, almost as if Slim had shot again. A cry of agony burst from Bradley, and he went staggering across the room, and was saved from falling only by the embrace of one corner. Even so, he swayed on his feet; gasping groans came from his lips; and his right arm hung loosely at his side at a weird angle.

"By God!" Uncle George ejaculated slowly. "I

once said that if ever anybody got Bradley, you would be the man — and, son, you certainly did get him!"

Himself reeling, struggling for breath, Clifford gazed at the face of his enemy, pulpy and bleeding and distorted with agony. "Yes, I got him," he gasped. Dizzily he walked over to Bradley. "I got you this time, Bradley, — I got you at last!"

But the loose figure with the misshapen face did not answer; as a matter of fact, Bradley did not hear. For a moment Clifford, panting, stood gazing on him; then his mind began to recover from the all-engrossing fury which had accomplished and motivated and energized this struggle. It began to return to the larger issues.

He wheeled about. "Yes — I got him. Jimmie, I think you'll find on him that Mordona necklace. Hand him over to a couple of your men. Yes, I got him," he repeated. "But I got only the body. The brains got away — Peter Loveman."

"And Jack?" eagerly put in Mr. Morton.

"He must have gone with Loveman —" And as Clifford answered he was asking himself a vastly more vital question: where was Mary Regan?

"But where did they go?" cried the father. "Can't we get him?"

Clifford did not reply. Already his faculties had recovered; they were working with incredible speed, a speed that made each thought a flash. He recalled what he had witnessed and heard before Bradley

had come — recalled the details of the plot with which Bradley had taunted his victim — he totaled them — he made his deduction.

He sprang across the room with new energy and seized Slim Harrison by the collar. "They would n't have taken your car without you! You're going to drive *us!* — and you 're going to show us all your machine has got! Come on, Jimmie," he cried sharply. "No, Jimmie, you and Uncle George go down and look through the basement and see if there's signs of any of them there — and meet me out in front! Come on, Mr. Morton!"

And leaving the bruised and unregarding Bradley in charge of Jimmie's men, Clifford hurried the dazed Slim Harrison before him through the tapestries and out of Le Bain's house of luxurious silence.

CHAPTER XXXII

PLEASURE PRESENTS ITS BILL

OVER the black, oiled boulevard that reaches, with many tributaries and parallels, from Manhattan's Fifty-ninth Street Bridge to the twin points of Long Island, Jack Morton's new racing roadster was speeding eastward through the heavy three-o'clock night — Jack at the wheel, Nina Cordova beside him, and Loveman and Hilton in the seat behind. The little lawyer had thought rapidly; and now, sunk low in the soft leather, he was counting his chances which had suddenly grown desperate, but which he still saw as large, if only there were no more slips and he got his share of luck. And as the car whirred on, devouring the silent, deserted miles, on and on went his brain, calculating his chances, shaping the details of his new course — that brain whose supreme and sole function was to plan — in which function all other qualities and potentialities of the man had become centered and concentrated, and for which they and the body itself had come solely to exist — that brain which would never cease its tireless, brilliant planning until death should still its mechanism.

He had revised his plans the instant Clifford had entered the dining-room — had seen instantly what

was his best and only way. Getting Jack where he now sat had been simple. "Come on, Jack, — the police will get you for this, too!" he had cried. And Jack, befuddled with drink, and feeling that his lot now lay with these friends, had obeyed instantly and without question. Into Jack's waiting car Loveman had sharply ordered those essential to his revised plan.

"You know the Long Island roads? — the way to Greenport?" he had asked Jack after they were in their seats.

"Sure."

"Then make Greenport as quick as you can. Remember that motor yacht Bradley spoke of?" He spoke with a cunning tone of excitedly pleasant anticipation. "We're going to be a bunch of pirates. — going to capture the old tub — and you and Nina and Hilton and I are going to have a nice little cruise and wine party all to ourselves. How's that?"

"Gre' stuff!" had been Jack's enthusiastic comment.

The wheel of his new speedster in his hands, there automatically came on Jack an exhilarating sense that here was another lark. It was just like so many other parties of months and years before that had started out hilariously from Broadway for a meteor-like rush through the dark to distant roadhouses — just one more party, but with a thrill and excitement that topped all others.

Even when drunk — that is, short of insensibility — Jack was a good driver. His hands seemed to have a peculiar brain of their own — albeit a reckless brain. Ten minutes after leaving Le Bain's house they were across the bridge, and five minutes later they were in the stretches of the boulevard; and Jack, pointing with his toe to a lighted dial, was chuckling to Nina: —

"Nice li'l' piece junk — eh, Nina? Doin' her li'l' ole sixty an hour, an' ain't half tryin'."

"But slow down at the turns, Jack. Please be careful!"

"'M always careful. Never had an accident." He laughed mischievously. "Goin' to show you nice li'l' breeze when we get out li'l' farther — goin' touch her up to ninety."

In the mean while, behind them, little Loveman was planning, planning — and acting. He drew out a thin morocco wallet, from it took a stamped envelope, and on this with a pencil he scrawled an address — the address of a New York bank where he had a personal account which was so private that there was not a scrap among his papers to indicate that such an account existed. Into this envelope he slipped the three checks Nina had given him, sealed it, placed it between the two halves of his wallet and replaced the wallet in his coat. That letter he would drop into a mail-box in Greenport.

Once on board the yacht they would make for the ocean — he knew the vessel to be large and stanch

enough to withstand any storm likely to arise in summer seas — and he knew the government patrol boats guarding the coast were not interfering with the course of American pleasure craft. For two days — longer if it suited the exigencies of his plan as it worked out, and perhaps to the end of the cruise — he would keep Jack at sea; then he would get rid of him at some convenient port. In the meantime Jack's checks would have gone through Jack's bank. No one suspected the truth about those checks — so he believed — and it would be a long time before the truth came out in the routine of business. Before that he would have managed to draw the funds out of this secret account — just how he did not yet see — but somehow he would manage it. And all the while they would be cruising southward along the coast, slipping into port when necessary to take on oil. And finally they would make Mexico, where Hilton would find sanctuary — and there or in some other Latin-American State he would start his career anew — his and Nina's. And evading extradition — for what charge could be formed against him with sufficient evidence to cause a foreign State to give it serious heed? — they would become great people, people of brillant position, he and Nina.

For all the time that he had seemingly been amused at her limitations and pretensions, and all the time that he had been quite willing to fit her into his dubious transactions, all this while Loveman

had had one ruling thought concerning Nina — that in the end she should be his. There had been many women in Peter Loveman's life, but Nina Cordova, all of whose flaws he knew and at whom he was ever laughing, Nina was the only woman he had ever loved.

Thus, as the car spun noiselessly through the heavy night, the shrewd, tireless brain schemed on and on — as that brain would scheme on and on, brilliantly, fascinated by its schemes and their working out, until death should bring its blankness. . . .

In the meanwhile, some miles back, another car was spinning toward the east and toward the dawn. But before that car had been launched on its flight several things had happened back on Manhattan.

When Clifford came out of Le Bain's house, thrusting the scruff-held Slim Harrison before him, and saw as he had expected that the red car belonging to Jack was gone, an officer in uniform halted before the high stoop. He was holding a woman by the arm, and the woman Clifford saw to be Nan Burdette.

"I saw her sneakin' out the basement door a few minutes ago," explained the officer, "and as she's a well-known character, and as she was actin' suspicious, I thought I'd better see what she'd been up to."

"So they dropped you, Nan," said Clifford. "I understand — you were n't of use to them any longer. But what did you hang behind for?"

"None of your business," said the woman.

"I guess I understand — if they were pinched you did n't want to get pinched with them, so you waited to make your getaway." Then, very sharply: "But what did they do with Mary Regan?"

"I don't know," she answered sullenly.

"Hold her, officer," Clifford ordered. "Lieutenant Kelly may have a definite charge against her in the morning."

Just then Jimmie Kelly and Uncle George emerged from a shadowy doorway beneath the stoop. There was some one between them, and at sight of this person Clifford stepped quickly toward the two.

"Mary!" he ejaculated. "Mary — where were you?"

"Mr. Loveman pushed me into the pantry and locked the door."

"I see," said Clifford rapidly. "Their plan against you would now not help them — you were now just excess baggage to them — and they merely wanted to get you out of the way for a while."

There was no time then for fuller explanations. "We're just starting after Loveman and Jack."

Mr. Morton had moved toward them. "Mary," he said, his voice steady only through great effort, "I'd like to have you go along to help bring Jack back — if Mr. Clifford does n't mind."

She hesitated, then glanced questioningly at Clifford. Clifford nodded.

"All right," she agreed.

"Here 's where I resign," said Uncle George — "on the grounds that I 'm too old, that I 'm too fat, that I 'm not needed, and that there 's no room for me. The best of luck to you!"

"Thanks, Uncle George!" And Clifford gripped his hand.

They hurried into the long, low, gray car — the car which was to have borne Mary upon that cunningly devised saturnalia. "Jimmie, if you don't mind, sit in front with Slim Harrison," said Clifford, and himself took the rear seat with Mr. Morton, Mary between them. He leaned forward and spoke with harsh dominance into Slim's ear. "Slim, I know this is a great machine, and I know that when you want to be you're a great driver — and understand this, your only chance of getting out of this affair halfway easy is for you to get us to Greenport not later than the car ahead. Now, turn her loose."

Slim turned her loose. Once he was well across the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, he lived up to all that the sporting pages had ever said in praise of his ability. The new car, clinging tight to the glass-smooth oiled macadam, flashed in a breath through villages — past dimly seen summer "cottages" of New York millionaires, grand ducal in their leisured magnificence — and on over the motor parkway through the humid, deserted night.

In the rear seat there was silence, except for the gale begotten by the machine's great speed. Now and then, by the swift-passing lights of a village,

Clifford saw the face of Mary Regan: it was pale and set, seemed without expression, and was fixed unchangingly ahead, not so much upon the brilliantly illumined road before them as upon the spaces of the night. He wondered what she was thinking of — she who had experienced so much these last few months, so many things that her calculations had not foreseen. But the swiftly gone glimpses of her white face gave him no clue. . . .

And now and again Clifford saw the face of Mr. Morton beside her. Also the face of this masterful man of business, who ruled his thousands of men and dominated a score of companies, and yet had failed to direct his own son in the way he would have him go — also Mr. Morton's face was drawn and pale, but it was fixed with straining impatience upon the roadway. Now and then Clifford saw him turn and gaze at Mary, whose forward-fixed look never shifted, and then turn back to the road, wetting his drawn, thinned lips. . . .

All the while Clifford's own mind was working. The professional part of Clifford felt the exultation of triumph already won — and the exultant excitement of the chase, which, if successful, would make triumph complete. He had already got Bradley; he felt certain that he soon was to get Loveman and the others. That much done, the dominating professional purpose would have been achieved. He would have won. . . . But there was the man element in Clifford, and it also was thinking as the car flew

through the night. His success meant that Loveman, and Bradley, and Nina, and the others, who had subtly worked to undermine whatever of good there was in Jack, would be removed as factors in Jack's life — and free of their influence and unopposedly under the influence of Mary, he and Mary might — Well, that was the way Life worked out. For long he had expected for himself nothing more. . . .

On, on they sped, always silent, through the August night — the car relaxing its speed only when there were sharp curves, and then at once picking up its flashing pace. An hour slipped by — another hour. They were now come upon the upper of the two fingers into which the eastern third of Long Island separates — and the blackness of the night had changed into a thick, sluggish dawn, that murky dawn held back and muffled by the heavy fogs which lie upon the outer portions of the island on humid days of late summer and keep the horns and sirens of the shore at their discordant singing until noon.

Presently Clifford half rose in the machine and pointed forward. "There they are!" he exclaimed.

Before them in the murk was a swiftly moving something, now visible, now vanished in a thicker portion of the fog. The others saw, but said nothing.

Clifford leaned forward and spoke into Slim's ear. "Just keep about this distance from them — they'll have to stop in Greenport and we can get them before they can go aboard."

Slim nodded. Keeping this quarter of a mile behind, they rushed on into the fog — flashed through Southold — over miles of marsh-bordered road — skirted for a space the single track of the Long Island Railway — skimmed more miles of marsh-bordered roadbed — swung about a curve — and then —

They clutched each other, their horrified eyes staring ahead. "My God!" gasped Clifford; and Mary gave a sharp cry — and a wrenching groan came from Mr. Morton. Instantly and instinctively Slim had shut off the gas and applied the brake — and slowly they rolled onward, staring wildly.

That thing which they had seen, happening all in an instant, was a commonplace of newspaper headlines. Long Island is a choice speeding-ground for that tribe known as "joy-riders." "Look out for Crossings" reads a placard in every passenger-coach of the Long Island Railroad — and the same placard bears a picture of what may befall those who do not. Jack, who had taken ten thousand risks and never had an accident, had risked his fortune just once too often. Driving at reckless speed, his ears filled with the roar of the wind, he had only his eyes — and too late had his eyes seen that freight engine thrust itself out of the fog. . . .

Clifford helped Mary out of their halted car, and silently they all began the work of examination — soon helped by the crew of the train. Jack's new red car was a tangle of twisted steel. . . . First they

found Nina and Hilton; both were conscious and crying out in their pain — each shrieked when touched. And then they found Peter Loveman: he was alive, but unconscious. Not far from him Mr. Morton picked up a morocco wallet, which he slipped into his pocket, Clifford not seeing this. And then Clifford and Mary found Jack: he also was alive and also unconscious. Strangely enough, his clothes were but little disordered, and there was not a visible scratch upon him. Lying with his pallid face toward the sky, the hair falling back from his forehead, he looked handsome and boyish and irresistibly likable and endowed with qualities which go to make an unusual man. Never to Clifford had that face looked so promising as it now looked.

There is a good little hospital in Greenport, and in half an hour the four were in it — and in less than another half-hour two famous New York specialists were in attendance, for many New York doctors have summer homes near Greenport, and are professionally connected with this little hospital. The first report of these two men, based on a hasty examination, was that Nina and Hilton had many broken bones, but would undoubtedly in time be as sound as ever; as to Jack and Loveman, a more careful examination was necessary before they could really tell anything.

There was nothing Clifford could do but merely wait. Through an open doorway — all the patients were on the same floor — he saw Mary Regan sit-

ting at a window. He entered. She gave him a look from her pale face, and without saying anything looked back out the window. He drew a chair up beside her, and they both sat gazing out — at the flag with a white field and a cross of blue which told that this little hospital had become an auxiliary hospital of the United States Navy — and beyond at the harbor, with its scores of small white craft, one of which was doubtless the yacht of Loveman's visioned voyage — the voyage that now would never be.

Neither spoke; there were no interruptions — Mr. Morton was at Jack's bedside, and had not left it. Clifford felt numb: part of this was physical weariness, part the shock of what had so swiftly happened, and part the sense of large issues (he was not then conscious of what they all were) that remained still in the balance. An hour of this heavy silence passed — two hours; Mary, with white, set face, continued to gaze out upon the harbor of tiny ships.

At length Clifford rose mechanically and went out into the corridor, and paced to and fro. Presently he saw a nurse come from Jack's room and enter Loveman's, and after a moment he saw the doctor who was with Loveman — Dr. Peters, Clifford knew him to be, a great nerve specialist, — emerge followed by the two nurses and enter Jack's room. He noted that Loveman's door had been left open; and first, without purpose, merely as a break in the routine of his walking, he paused and looked

in. Then he entered and crossed to Loveman's bed.

To his surprise Loveman's large bright eyes were wide open; they recognized him — and Clifford saw that they were alive with all of Loveman's intelligence. He gazed down at the sheet-covered figure, and something of the fury revived which had lain dumb in him these last two or three hours.

"Well, Loveman, I've landed you at last!" he said grimly.

The little lawyer made no response.

"Make no mistake about it, Loveman, — I've got you for fair this time — and got you eleven different ways from Sunday!"

Still the little man did not speak, though his eyes showed that he understood every word. Clifford was provoked at the manner in which Loveman ignored him.

"Have n't you any come-back at all, Loveman — you were usually quick enough with your tongue."

"See here — what are you doing with my patient?" a sharp voice called from the door.

Clifford turned. Approaching was Dr. Peters.

"He may be your patient, but he is my prisoner," Clifford returned stiffly, still under the influence of his revived fury. But at once he was himself again. "I beg your pardon, Dr. Peters, but this man here is responsible for all that has happened." And then: "He seems to have very much of a grouch against me — rather natural, I suppose. He would n't

even say a word to me. What's the matter with him?"

"What's the matter?" Dr. Peters repeated, looking at him keenly. Then he drew Clifford aside, out of Loveman's hearing. "All that's the matter with Mr. Loveman," he answered slowly, "is that the accident caused a hemorrhage affecting the sensory and motor portions of the brain causing a permanent aphasia."

"What's that mean, doctor, in plain English?"

"It means that he has permanently lost the use of legs and arms, and that he'll never speak again."

Clifford stared. "But he seems to understand!" he cried.

"He understands everything. His brain is as good as it ever was, and it will be as good as ever for perhaps thirty years to come. But by no possibility can he ever communicate to a second person what that brain is thinking of."

Clifford stared at the doctor, mumbled something, and unsteadily walked out. In the corridor he leaned against a wall and drew a deep breath. As the full significance of the doctor's words sank in, he was awed, appalled. That great clear brain fated by the momentum of a life's habit to go on planning — never to be able to put any of those plans into action himself — never able to communicate a plan to an agent or accomplice — but always planning — tirelessly planning — for thirty years or more! . . .

After a time he straightened up and entered the

room of Hilton, who was in less pain, but who just then hated all mankind; and with Hilton he had a few grim, direct words. After that he had a few words with Jimmie Kelly, who was waiting below. Then he went back and sat down beside Mary, and briefly he told her what had befallen Loveman.

Again they sat in silence, gazing out upon the harbor. Perhaps another hour passed. Then Mr. Morton entered. He was haggard and gray of face. Clifford and Mary rose.

"Jack?" breathed Mary, moving toward him.

Mr. Morton seemed at first unable to speak. But when his voice did issue, though husky and low, it was controlled and strangely emotionless.

"Jack never regained consciousness," he said. "Jack — Jack has just died."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE STUFF IN MARY REGAN

THERE was again a long silence. Clifford's heart leaped strangely at Morton's announcement, as perhaps hearts should not at words of death. Then Mr. Morton spoke once more, still in the low, controlled voice, his words and steady eyes directed at Mary.

"I shall arrange to take Jack to Chicago. Since you are his widow, of course you will come along." And then the emotionless voice of this hard-driving man of great affairs broke with emotion. "And, Mary, — I want you to come because you are my daughter-in-law. I know now you did all a woman could for Jack; I have come to respect you for what you are. You are all I have — I need you, Mary. I hardly need tell you, — since it may make little difference to you, you are so strange, — but all I have will go to you, and your life is to be the life of my daughter."

Mary stood staring at him, loose-lipped, and did not speak. Clifford watched her, dazed by this last turn of circumstances. He saw the realities and prospects that Morton's words had given her. She now possessed, open and aboveboard, all that she had ever dreamed to gain by trickery — yes, and

more! And she had it all unhampered! All these months he had tried to make Life test her — and Life had responded by, in the end, giving her everything!

Still Mary did not speak. Mr. Morton went on, a note of urging, of reassurance, in his subdued voice:

"And, Mary, — whatever I may have said in the past, — you have nothing to fear from me. You are my daughter, and you have my respect. And you have nothing to fear from any one else, since I know everything. . . . There's an afternoon train out of here; we'll be taking that, Mary."

And then Mary spoke. Her voice was low, but its tone was steady.

"I shall be willing — and glad — to do all I can to help. But I cannot go with you as your daughter."

"What?" cried Mr. Morton. And then: "I don't understand."

The low voice went on: —

"I married Jack solely to make money and gain position. Even before last night I had decided never to take them. And now, after what has happened, even more can I never take them. Believe me, I mean no offense to you, but I cannot be your daughter-in-law."

"What?" repeated Mr. Morton.

Clifford gazed at her, stupefied.

"While Jack lived my marriage to him was a secret," the low voice went on. "Now that he is dead, I prefer to have it continue to remain un-

known, if that can be managed. I think it can. If the few who know are made to believe that I am trying to force myself upon you, they will keep silent out of pure malice toward me. That is, I want it to remain unknown, unless Mr. Clifford needs my testimony to convict in his cases."

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Clifford. "Loveman's case is closed. As for Bradley, Lieutenant Kelly found that Mordona necklace on him, and Hilton, seeing that the game is over, has just turned State's evidence and confessed that he and Bradley stole it. That should be sufficient to take care of Bradley."

Mary turned again to Mr. Morton. "Then I prefer to have it all remain as it has been — unknown. I do not want even the profit out of this of having Jack's name."

Then came a quick set to the jaw of this man long accustomed to having his own way. "But I can publicly proclaim you to be my daughter!"

"But you will not," she returned quietly, "since I ask you not to."

The set look continued for a moment. Then it relaxed.

"All right — just as you say." He drew an envelope from an inner pocket. "But if you will not accept my fortune, you cannot escape Jack's, for it is this moment automatically and legally yours." From the envelope — it was the one Loveman had addressed in the car — he drew out three slips of

paper and handed them to her. "There it is — three checks totaling one hundred and eighty thousand dollars. And you do not need to reveal yourself as Jack's widow to get the money, since the checks are made out to 'Cash.' All you need to do is to deposit them."

She gazed at the checks, then looked up at him. "If Jack had had no wife, I suppose his fortune would revert to you."

"Naturally."

"You understand, I can make nothing out of this — nothing." Slowly she tore up the checks. "I can be of no service to you? — or Jack?"

"None. Except in ways you have refused."

She turned to Clifford. "Am I needed here?"

Clifford shook his head.

"Then I think I'll be going back to town," she said quietly.

Morton held out his hand, which she took. "You are the strangest person I ever knew," he said huskily. "Good-bye, Mary, — and — and God bless you!"

"Good-bye," said his daughter-in-law.

She turned and went out. Clifford watched her as she passed through the broad hospital corridor and then disappeared down the wide stairway.

"Mr. Morton," said Clifford, "I'm not needed either — Lieutenant Kelly will remain in charge here. I'll be going back to the city, too."

Mr. Morton gripped Clifford's hand. "Thanks,

Clifford — and good-bye." The habitually hard face softened yet further, and his voice lowered. "And, Clifford, — you're a lucky man, if it turns out the way I think it will!"

It did. In the deepening dusk of a month later, from an interior and out-of-the-way county seat whose records were rarely looked over by inquisitive eyes that had an interest in transmitting what they saw to New York City, Clifford was driving a small roadster at an easy pace, one passenger beside him. A few minutes before that passenger had undergone a change of name. In New York City, if all went as expected, it would merely be known that she had changed her name from Mary Regan to Mary Clifford.

The marriage had been the ultimate achievement in privacy. No one had journeyed here with them. But one person, who had insisted on being taken into their confidence, had appeared discreetly and anonymously at the brief ceremony in the little court-house — Uncle George. And after the ceremony was over, he had kissed Mary with a simplicity, a sincerity, a tender dignity that sophisticated, cynical Broadway would have been amazed to see in its favorite.

"Mary," — his hands on both her shoulders, his voice quavering a bit, — "I'm glad I've lived long enough to see the daughter of one old pal, and the niece of another old pal, definitely turn into this

road. Yes, I'm mighty glad. It's the only road that's worth traveling — and I guess I ought to know. I know you're going to be happy. God bless you, my dear!" . . .

And now, as the pair moved easily through the closing twilight, all bars at last were down between these two — all barriers of pride, of reserve, of reticence, of opposing wills, all the long masking of hearts. Their souls were very close together.

They had been riding for several miles in silence, both still awed by what had just taken place in the little town behind them — when Mary spoke softly: —

"You promised to tell me when — when this was over, what you and Commissioner Thorne were talking about this morning. Are n't you going to tell me what it was?"

"Commissioner Thorne again offered me the position of Chief of the Detective Bureau."

"And you?"

"I turned it down."

"It was a wonderful chance!" she exclaimed. "You refused because of me?"

"No. But I thought you might think so; that's why I did n't want to tell you until everything was settled between you and me. I had thought it all out before. It was a big job he offered me, yes, — but primarily it was an office job, a routine, administrative job. I wanted to be out where I would be in contact with people and their problems; where

instead of touching life only through the reports of subordinates, I would touch life at first hand. I felt that in my case I could be of more service in such a way. You understand?"

"Yes," she said. "And I think, perhaps, — if you'd let me, — I could help at that kind of work."

"I know you could!" said Clifford. He went on, after a brief pause: "And we talked of something else, Mary, — the Chief and I. He told me again of that talk he had had with you when you went to him almost a year ago; and, Mary," — his voice lowered, — "our talk became for me a searchlight thrown backward upon all that has happened these last few months, and especially a searchlight upon you, Mary. You may have had many motives for deciding against me, and for doing what you did. But I now know there was one big motive which I never before fully realized, and of which you perhaps were never conscious."

"And that?" she asked.

"You did what you did partly because you loved me, and because you have loved me all along. You believed that for you to marry me would injure what you saw as a big public career for me; you thought you were not the right wife for me. As for Jack, you did n't really care for him — and in the beginning you were n't concerned in what your action might mean to him. But me — me you did n't want to hurt in any way." He repeated himself: "I see that clearly now — even though you did not

know it, that was one of the motives that ruled you."

"I would not dare say that in my own behalf," she whispered. And then she went on: "But if, after all, I have turned out what you thought me, it is because you believed in me so long — and because your belief in me, and the way you handled me, forced me to become something different. . . . But it must have been hard for you — very, very hard!"

"It's been a thousand times worth it all, Mary," he breathed, "a thousand times worth it all!"

He caught her hand and held it tight beneath his on the steering-wheel — it was as though now they were jointly steering their united lives; and they sped on through the soft, star-blossoming night, in the silence of full understanding, southward toward the great city where so long they had fought each other, and where now at the last they were to begin to build a life together.

THE END

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